

IN NAAMAN'S HOUSE

MARIAN MACLEAN FINNEY

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BY
MARIAN MacLEAN FINNEY



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TO
MY FRIENDS

"Other blessings may be taken away, but if we have acquired a good friend, we have a blessing which improves in value when all others fail."

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CHAPTER I

NEW ACQUAINTANCES

"I LIKE not the maiden, Caleb. No good will come of taking in this daughter of strange people."

"Thy words belie thy kind heart, Sarah. Thou wert willing to take under our care the child of my kinsman, even though estranged from his father's house by his marriage. I fear, however," and the man's voice was troubled, "that we shall not be able to make her happy."

"Make her happy!" broke in the woman's indignant tones. "I fear that she will not be able to make herself useful. She hath not so far." Then, more gently, "Yet is she welcome to all we can do for her now that she hath no kin save us, but I am fearful because her mother was of the natives of Canaan so that she hath not been instructed in the way of Jehovah. If she should have a wrong influence over our little Miriam!"

The woman in the doorway glanced over her shoulder at the scene within the dwelling where an animated conversation was in progress.

"Awake, Judith. I myself have awaked early. See, the door hath been opened and the fresh morning breezes blow sweet after the night-time when no air cometh in at all. Father hath almost finished

leading out the animals. Did they bother thee last night with their stamping? Peradventure some wild animal was prowling about outside. Is it not a fine arrangement to have the mangers built between their part of the house and ours? And is it not comforting to know that at night and on stormy days they are safe under the same roof with us? Art thou still asleep?"

An older maiden sprang to her feet. "Who could sleep through thy chatter, Miriam? Thou makest more noise than the oxen and the asses and the cow and the calf all put together." But a smile tempered the severity of the speech.

The younger and smaller maid laughed delightedly and stooping to the floor began to fold the thickly padded rug or quilt on which she had slept, depositing it in a nook in the wall apparently built for the purpose and keeping up a steady stream of talk designed to be informing to the new arrival.

"If our olive trees have a good crop this year, we are going to have curtains to hide the beds. Last year father built this wooden floor to raise our living room above the ground where the animals stay. It is cleaner and dryer now and ants and mice do not trouble us so much. Thinkest thou not we have a splendid home?"

Judith's somewhat cool response caused Miriam to look at her in hurt surprise. The mother flashed a reassuring smile from her seat in the doorway,

though never ceasing for a moment her skillful manipulation of a large sieve. It was tossed and shaken and every few minutes tilted sideways to allow a tiny shower of straws and dust to fall upon the ground. While Miriam took up the beds Judith was required to assist her aunt in grinding the newly sieved grain. With a steady, monotonous motion they worked the wooden handle of the mill back and forth, back and forth, never hastening but never stopping until at last the sound of the grinding became lower and lower and finally ceased, the whole grains of wheat having been crushed into a coarse powder between the upper and lower stones of the mill.

It did not take long for this to be made up into dough, patted into small, flat cakes, and baked quickly in the out-of-doors oven made of heated stones. By ten o'clock, as was usual in the Land of Israel, the morning repast was ready: hot bread, fresh milk, and to-day there were young onions dipped in salt. Had this been winter instead of spring, there might have been a handful of raisins or a few olives or the bread might possibly have been dipped in grape-syrup. This meal was always relished, however, for no other would be cooked until sunset. By the time it was finished the morning mists had rolled away, the sun had dried up the heavy dews of the night before, and the distant fields were calling to the husbandmen.

Linking her arm through Judith's, Miriam guided the newcomer through the one long street of the village.

"Thou hast a beautiful name, Judith, almost as beautiful as thyself."

"A Hittite name, Miriam, what thy people call 'heathen,' so it will not recommend me hereabouts, but thou art named for one of the great women of thy race."

"Oh, not because she was great," was the quick response, "but because she was useful and good. Knowest thou not how she cared for her baby brother, Moses, when she was just a little maid like me?"

The conversation was cut short by their arrival at a dwelling from whose open doorway voices floated out upon the balmy air.

"Thy father and I toiling and sacrificing for thee, our only child, and thou rebelling when we ask for appreciation and obedience!"

Another voice, choked with sobs, made answer: "Thou didst have no objection to Benjamin until Abner fancied me."

"Dost thou add impudence to stubbornness? It is well thou hast thy father and me to see that thy folly doth not ruin thy young life."

Catching sight of the two hesitating upon the threshold, the woman hastened to welcome them, then turned to the girl she had first addressed:

"Wipe away thy tears and take thy water jar. See, Rachel, here is Miriam and her young kinswoman from the Plain of Sharon, a maiden of thine own age. Go with them and be diligent in thy task, but this time next year thy feet will take no such journeys nor thy hands be so employed, for thou shalt have servants to do thy bidding."

The woman turned to her work and the three girls proceeded on their way, Miriam walking between the grief-stricken Rachel and the envious Judith, seeking to atone for the silence which had fallen upon each. Thus she began to speak in joyous enthusiasm:

"Now that the rains are over for the season, dost thou notice how sweet is the air? Every breeze bringeth the mingled scent of wild flowers which the hand of the Lord hath planted to delight the bees and us. Even from here we can tell what their faces will be like when we see them closer: anemones and poppies and wild tulips and arbutus and hosts of others. Even at night it is interesting here, for thou canst not tell whether thou wilt be awakened by the song of a nightingale or the howling of a wolf, and in the daytime, see!"

With a sweep of her arm she indicated the light-green garden patches and wheat fields in the valley below them and the darker green of the olive groves and patches of oaks and pines nestling among the rugged gray hills on every side.

Neither of the girls commented and Miriam became silent.

At the foot of the path they were descending Judith paused to take breath. "To one who hath but lately come from the level plain along the seacoast, the mountains are wearying," she remarked. "Why are thy cities perched upon the hilltops when thou must grow thy food in the valleys?"

As Rachel seemed disinclined to talk, Miriam took it upon herself to answer: "To be cool in summer and relieved from danger of flood in winter and safe from our enemies all the time. Knowest thou not how often the Syrians have swooped down upon us, like birds of prey, seeking that wherewith to enrich themselves?" Then, in tones of sympathy: "The path will not seem so steep when thou art used to it. For to-day do thou rest here and I will make two journeys to the spring, one for thee and one for me. Thou knowest we are commanded by our Law to be mindful of strangers because our people were strangers in the Land of Egypt, and I must remember how lonely I should feel to have to live where nobody knew or loved me even as thou."

Judith, deeply touched, was affectionately declining Miriam's offer of rest when a whoop startled alike the echoes and the girls and the mischievous face of a boy, somewhat older than Miriam, peeped from behind a rock.

"Nathan!" The exclamation was full of distress,

and Miriam gazed at a shattered water jar at her feet. "Knowest thou not that jars cost wheat and sometimes olives? But," soothingly, "never mind, the jar is not wasted, for *these* pieces will make drinking cups and *these* will do to carry coals in. They are splendid sherds. Hast thou noticed, Eli," as a still older lad came hurrying toward them, "that no matter what is broken there is always something left?"

The entire party was busy picking up bits of pottery from the path, when a youngish man joined them, at sight of whom Rachel immediately called to mind an errand elsewhere and, with a whispered explanation to Miriam, promptly disappeared. While the newcomer was apparently known to the younger girl, her face did not light up with pleasure, although he addressed her gently.

Were they bound for the spring? He was going in the same direction. He had not met Judith before. So she was Miriam's kinswoman from the Plain of Sharon where the roses grow. Then Sharon had sent her most beautiful rose to bloom near the Jordan! And these lads, he ought to know them. Fine, sturdy boys. Ah, Hannah's children. He believed that they and their mother lived on a bit of his land. He had the pleasure, now and then, of doing them little favors. Of course he knew them, should probably know them better as time went on. Lads of excellent qualities indeed!

His soft voice trailed on and on. After the manner of the Orient, the man and boys walked ahead, the girls following.

So, thought Judith, this was Abner, the rich suitor for Rachel's unwilling hand and she (Judith) the unwanted guest in an irksome home. If only their places might be reversed! But no hint of inward agitation appeared in her outward manner, nor, when the awe with which the boys had first regarded the newcomer had gradually changed into friendliness and the elder of the two had been beguiled into telling an original story, did she appear to do aught but listen.

He cast it in the form of a fable, after the manner of the young theological students of the day, the "Sons of the Prophet," among whom his father had been numbered:

"Once there was a young ant who lived with a large colony of its relatives in the clean, warm earth. It had everything to make it happy, a good home and abundance of food, yet was it wroth, for its elders required it to work. 'Come,' said they, 'lend thy strength to the task of carrying home this grain that we may live and not die when the wet winter sets in and there is no food to be had.'

"This little ant, however, who had never seen a wet winter, was rebellious and ran off to hide and sulk. Soon it saw a strange sight: men digging great holes in the fields and coating the floor and

walls with a white substance. With his curiosity aroused, he went back to the spot day after day until the sun came out with great heat, the harvest passed and the threshed and winnowed grain was carefully stored in these underground chambers, the cavities being closed in such a way that thieves could not readily discover its hiding place.

“‘Ah,’ said the ant, ‘here is my opportunity. Once inside such a place as that, I should have no fear of cold or hunger, such as my elders are always trying to guard against. Naught would I have to do but eat, sleep and grow fat. Then should I be happy.’

“Forthwith he watched his chance and slipped into a little opening just before the workmen closed it. Alas for his expectations, however, for where moth and rust could not flourish neither could an ant. In the stifling atmosphere he began to grow faint. Tortured in body with this nauseating sickness and in mind with the thought that he had brought all this trouble upon himself by his sloth and selfishness, he finally expired.”

Miriam, who had listened with rapt attention, now beamed upon Judith, who stifled a yawn. The next instant she clutched the younger maid’s arm. “See, Miriam, the little gorge below us is filled with innumerable gray shapes, and from the sound of a reed flute which ascends to us I perceive that it is a shepherd with his flock.”

They came nearer the objects pointed out. Miriam

gave one look and a joyous little cry: "It can be no other than my brother, Benjamin, whom thou hast not met before, Judith. He giveth my father's flock a drink below the spring where the water floweth still and quiet so they will not be frightened. See, he carrieth a lamb in his bosom. Is it not nice that men wear such long, loose garments belted in at the waist, so they can gather the fullness together wherewith to carry things?"

By this time they were near enough for greetings. Miriam bounded forward with an eager salutation for Benjamin and much compassion for the lamb. "See, Judith, it is all torn and bleeding, but its good shepherd hath anointed its wounds with oil and even put some on its head to comfort and refresh it."

Judith listened and smiled. From under lids discreetly lowered she was conscious that both the very young man and the older one were stealing glances of approval at her.

"Peradventure," she thought, "it may not be so uninteresting here after all."

Abner also listened and smiled, making mental calculations. As he moved away there was on his face a look of resolution. "Why not?" he communed with himself. "Fine lads both and can become useful. The younger and sturdier can care for the young of the flock while my shepherds take their mothers out to graze. The elder hath a re-

markable mind, coming as he doth of a family which combineth Israel's piety and culture. He can be trained as a clerk. There is trading to be done and accounts to be kept. It should be regarded as a kindness to their mother. Let me see, how much doth she owe me? Yea, enough and more."

Meanwhile Sarah had observed with surprise Rachel's hasty return and now watched with some anxiety for Miriam and Judith.

"I tell thee, Caleb, friendship with a heathen bodeth no good."

"Surely, Sarah, no harm can come from caring for the orphan and the needy as we are commanded in our Law," and the man's voice was almost harsh in its reproof.

"Seemeth to me it might depend somewhat upon the orphan," murmured the woman, softly, "and my heart hath been strangely heavy since I first beheld this maiden."

CHAPTER II

SURPRISES

CALEB'S face expressed entire approval as he looked after Judith, disappearing down the hill. "Thou seest, Sarah, that all this poor child needed was instruction in the way of righteousness."

"And firmness to see that she walketh therein," put in the wife.

"But she hath a willing mind, Sarah. Hast thou not noticed how, of late, she needeth no second bidding to go to the spring? She doth not even wait for Miriam to help; she watcheth to see when the jars need refilling and seeth to them most diligently."

"Yea," was the response, "and I have wondered what—" but Caleb, sighing, was already taking his way to the valley as Judith neared the spring.

A little smile played about her lips. "How strange it is," she thought, "that Benjamin's sheep need a drink of water and our jars must be refilled at exactly the same time every day!"

At that very moment Rachel, with a tiny reed basket of bread on her arm, started in the same direction.

"If I *should* see him while I feed the pigeons,"

her face was rosy red, "and he *might* be somewhere near, although, of course, if I knew for certain I could not be so bold as to be there too—"

She entered a little gulch whose narrow walls constantly widened as one neared the spring. The air was sweet with aromatic shrubs. A bird hidden somewhere seemed about to burst its throat with melody. Insects buzzed a little song of content. As the girl appeared, a flock of wild pigeons rose from various resting places and circled around her with the familiarity of old friendship. Her thoughts, however, were elsewhere. Peeping through the bushes, she had seen Benjamin and Judith, laughing and talking together with all too evident enjoyment. For a moment—or was it several?—she seemed rooted to the spot with surprise, then, sick at heart, she had dropped down upon the coarse, green grass, grateful for the overhanging rocks and bushes which gave her safe concealment.

To think of Benjamin, who had never cared for any maid but herself! They had been childish sweethearts. Around her neck at this very instant was suspended from a grass-woven chain a bracelet of dried grasses which he had given her once when they played at a wedding. In a thousand ways since then and with a tenderness she could not doubt he had told her of his love. Had he not desired Caleb, his father, to ask her parents' consent to their marriage? True it had been refused, Ab-

ner's proposal having been received unexpectedly a day or so earlier, yet she and Benjamin had hoped against hope, and now—

But the pigeons were insistent. They pecked from her basket. They alighted upon her shoulders. They watched for the customary open handful of crumbs from which to eat. Mechanically, since they would not be denied, she fed them. Abner, passing along the brow of the hill, saw both tableaux. He stopped, looked, and passed on, pondering deeply.

"Rachel is the gentler, the sweeter," he said to himself, "but this maid from Sharon is likewise pleasing. I wonder! Yea, I wonder!"

In a little while Judith started homeward, the smile still lingering. "What a frank, winning boy!" she meditated, "and not unambitious, either, but I do not envy his charming Rachel the hard work and self-denial she will have as a shepherd's wife. Strange how she turneth from this man Abner, who hath treasures of oil and wine and grain; who hath men servants and maid servants."

She stopped and gazed over field after field of barley and wheat, now almost ready for the harvest. "Had I but her opportunity!" She stamped her sandaled foot to the great peril of the water jar and its precious contents, but her rage soon spent itself and she became thoughtful. At last she drew a deep breath.

"Why not?" she asked herself. "Of course an

Eastern woman may not decide whom she will marry, but there is no reason why she should not try to influence her fate somewhat," and, quite calm again, even elated, she turned her face toward the home she found so irksome.

Scarcely had she passed when two young men crossed hastily the well-worn path and started to descend the steep sides of the gulch. Suddenly one placed a detaining hand on the other's arm and they dropped down behind a sheltering bush, peering out and speaking guardedly.

"Seest thou anything, Isaac?"

"Naught do I see, Lemuel, but what one is apt to behold all the way from the Dead Sea to Damascus: a romantic little gorge and a pretty maiden feeding some wild pigeons. I thought thou hadst discovered something."

His companion regarded him with amusement. "Something thou meanest, Isaac, to breed distrust or caution or care, whereas the 'something' was only satisfactory. Much hast thou to learn, or peradventure thou art over-fastidious. Knowest thou not that women were made to delight the hearts of men—that is, as long as they keep their youth and their faith in us, which is not long at the best—and that our journey hath been singularly barren of such interests as lovely maidens far from home?"

The information was received coldly. "Far from home, Lemuel, but not far from what, in this moun-

tainous land, they call a 'road,' and not far from her city's supply of water. This gorge doubtless containeth a spring or stream. As thou art aware, they have wells only in the lowlands. The maiden is therefore not far from protection even if *I* were absent."

The other laughed sneeringly. "Thy bravery and thine honor doeth credit to thine house. Peradventure it will purchase thee promotion. It shall be reported to my lord N-a-a-m-m-m."

A hand was placed firmly over his mouth. "Thy indiscretion will spoil our errand, which shall also be reported and to the same source."

A not unmusical cry came echoing down the glen :
"R- a- c- h- e l."

The girl with her head in her hands neither moved nor answered, but in a moment Miriam's face peeped through the foliage and lighted up with relief.

"Everywhere have I searched for thee, Rachel, and Eli hath helped. He hath a new story, a splendid one. Dost thou not want to hear?"

Rachel gave a half-hearted assent and the two new arrivals threw themselves on the coarse green grass near Rachel, while Eli, smiling in response to Miriam's eager encouragement, began the story she considered so wonderful :

"Once there was a cave which the hand of God had hollowed out of the limestone hills and in front of which he planted bushes to hide its mouth. At

first the cave was happy enough, but after awhile it became envious of those in less lonely situations. Right in the midst of its discontent, however, along came a leopard who was pleased with this retired spot and brought up a family here.

"Next, there arrived a band of robbers who slew the wild animals and deposited themselves and their ill-gotten gains in the cave, hiding by day and sallying forth at night. At last some of the thieves were slain in a battle with honest travelers and the rest of the band fled.

"From that time on the cave-dwellers were of a better class. It became the abode of the hunted and oppressed. Our father David once took refuge here from the fury of King Saul, and many a troubled soul afterward, including the Man of God, Elijah. But its greatest usefulness came when Queen Jezebel established Baal-worship as the court religion of Israel and persecuted the prophets of the Lord.

"At this time Obadiah, the mayor of King Ahab's court, hid herein fifty of the hundred prophets he saved from the queen's vengeance, the cave being very commodious. Hereafter it was known as 'the prophet's cave,' and of late years shepherds have kept provender always on hand so they may resort hither with their flocks when winter storms drive them from the hills.

"One day the cave, with the wisdom of years, was

reviewing its history. 'How foolish was I and ignorant,' it thought, 'to be dissatisfied with the place Jehovah had appointed me when I should not have been nearly so useful had I been on the highway, where I would have chosen to be.' "

The tale ended, Rachel praised it faintly, but the younger girl beamed delighted appreciation, watching Eli's departing figure as long as she could see it.

"Doth he not make thee feel as if thou wert standing up on tiptoe all inside, Rachel?" she demanded. "Some day he is going to learn to read and write and become learned in the Law, as was his father, and go about the country teaching and prophesying."

Rachel put a hand to her head. "Let us go home," she said, "I feel weak and ill. Peradventure it is the summer heat which hath come on so suddenly." She staggered to her feet.

Miriam, at once all sympathy, put an arm around her friend's waist and they took the steep path out of the gorge, the pigeons still circling around the empty basket. Only once did the smaller maid speak and that was just as they came opposite the hiding place of the two strangers.

"Thou knowest, Rachel, that Eli's tale was a true one, being of our own prophet's cave here in this very glen, thirty paces beyond the fallen sycamore tree, its mouth hidden by the sumac bushes. Thou wilt remember how oft we have been there."

Rachel murmured an assent and they moved out of sight and hearing. The young men rose from their cramped positions.

"The very place, Lemuel, thanks to our small friend, though she knew not whom she was befriending. This night shall we abide there and mark the spot for future need. This is a rich little valley. To-morrow we separate, each taking the way determined aforetime," and with swift steps they proceeded in the direction Miriam had indicated.

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The perfumed breath of May lost its elusive sweetness and became burdened with the heat of June. The evening meal was over and the last faint radiance of sunset was swallowed up in darkness. Caleb closed and barred the heavy door against the summer breezes and the family spread their sleeping mats in preparation for rest.

Judith yawned audibly. "So glad am I that this tiresome day hath drawn to a close."

Miriam was scandalized. "Glad that the Sabbath is over? And soon after sunrise one of the Sons of the Prophet came to instruct the city in the ways of Jehovah."

"But," insisted Judith, "I like not that long-haired Order of wayside preachers who shout and denounce and talk mysteries."

Caleb felt it his duty to impart information.

"Alas, the sacred Order is not what it was before King Ahab took unto himself the foreign Queen, Jezebel. A fine soldier and statesman was Ahab, and I doubt not he believed he benefited Israel by his alliance with our more cultured and enterprising neighbors, the Phœnicians. He thought much about the advantages of trade, as shown by his treaty with Ben-hadad, the Syrian king, whereby the merchants of Israel now have their own street in Damascus, the great capital city of Syria.

"Many good qualities had King Ahab, but a sorry day it was for Israel's religion when he allowed Queen Jezebel a free hand to spread Baal-worship, even to the persecution of the prophets of the Lord. Hundreds were put to death; many fled to more peaceful homes, such as Egypt, and others still bowed the knee, not so much to the hated Baal as to the strong authority of the court. Fear threatened to destroy all that was purest and best in the land, but the Lord of Hosts hearkened to the distress of his people and granted deliverance by his prophet Elijah.

"Since then, and especially in these later years under Elijah's successor, Elisha, the prophetic Guilds have been revived in the hope of spreading piety and some degree of learning among the people at large; they who have been exposed for so long to the pernicious teachings of the priests of Baal, as encouraged by that wicked woman, Jezebel."

"But truly the service of Baal is much more joyous than thy worship of Jehovah with all thy strict observances and commandments," said Judith, earnestly, "and why call Queen Jezebel 'wicked'? It was but courteous to a foreigner to allow her to bring her own religion into her new home, and naturally she was anxious to spread the teachings in which she believed."

In tones whose sternness was softened by pity, Caleb bade her hush. "Thou knowest not what thou sayest. The 'wicked,' through the pride of his heart, will not seek after the one true God. They care not to know the Law by which we, his chosen, are warned and in keeping of which there is great reward. It is well that thou shouldst understand clearly—"

A hubbub outside claimed attention. Faintly at first, and then nearer and nearer until it halted outside the very door, came the yelping and barking of dogs mingled with the sound of running footsteps, and voices.

Miriam crept to Sarah's outstretched arms. "O mother," in a frightened whisper, "thinkest thou the Syrians be upon us?"

The mother held her close. Caleb snatched up the goad ordinarily used for driving oxen, the sharply pointed end of which made a formidable weapon. From the darkness came a sound of labored breathing and a woman's sobbing cry.

"Open, Caleb. It is only I, Hannah, and my children, Eli and Nathan, and the dogs rend us."

As the door was thrown open to admit them she cried, mournfully, "Peace, peace be to thy home, though there be none in mine."

She was almost incoherent with grief. "The word came to me but a little while before the Sabbath and I waited until the passing of the holy day to hurry to thee, my friends. The dogs mistook us for foes and pursued. In the darkness we stumbled oft and fell. Yea, we are bruised, but our bodies are less sore than our hearts, for Abner, my creditor, taketh my two sons, Eli and Nathan, to be bondmen for debt.

"Since my widowhood have I lived on his land. Oft hath he brought us food. Once, twice, thrice have I borrowed of him, so kind hath he seemed. Always he urged me to take more and yet more than I asked. Never once hath this shame seemed possible. Let us kneel in supplication to the God of our fathers."

"Yea, Hannah, and I doubt not he will hear and answer. Abide thou with us for a time and tomorrow we will see if aught can be done."

CHAPTER III

VISITORS

OVER the peaceful Israelitish hills came the piping of a reed flute. Anyone familiar with the country would know that it was a shepherd, seeking to assure the flock of his continued presence that they might fear no evil, but to the young man, scarcely more than a boy, lying prone on his back in the shade of the bushes, it conveyed nothing at all, yet it was the only sound which persisted in his consciousness. He lived by it as much as did the sheep and goats. When the tune was blithe he saw sunlit fields and abundant harvests; shaded glens and cool, gurgling streams; a palace and a soldiers' barracks; the face of an old, bedridden woman and a delicately pretty girl feeding pigeons in a romantic spot. When the notes were sad—as they frequently were—he defended this maid from some grave peril in which the odds were all against him.

There came a day, however, when he no longer raved in delirium, but looked upon his surroundings with recognition in his eyes. He tried to sit up, to reach a little water-bag that looked cool and comforting, but finding himself weighted down with a strange heaviness, contented himself with gazing

around wonderingly. The sky seemed so near. No, it was not the sky. It was a covering of skins sewed together and stretched from one bush to another over him. Nothing else save the interminable flute which told his newly awakened senses that the shepherd was near. It was all so soothing, just lying there, and he was so unexpectedly weak, that he closed his eyes and sank into a deep and refreshing slumber.

When he awoke the canopy over his head had been removed and he gazed at the brilliant stars. Looking around, he decided that he must be inside of a sheepfold. By the moonlight he discerned roughly built stone walls on four sides. The open entrance was guarded by a recumbent shepherd, staff in hand, alert, watchful. One, two, three other figures he counted, evidently sleeping heavily beside great gray masses which he knew must be sheep. All at once a scream pierced the silence, a hideous, unearthly sound, and then a long, lithe body leaped over the wall.

The young man who observed these things knew instinctively that it was a mountain lion, tempted far from its rocky lair by hunger. He knew that the shepherds, instantly awakened, would give battle, and that they would be more than a match for any wild animal in search of food, but a sense of his own helplessness swept over him. He saw the terror of the sheep, the mangled body of a victim, heard the

cry of its mother, and then a great wave of sickness shut out sight and sound. He had fainted from sheer weakness.

A little later he opened his eyes upon the troubled face of the shepherd—*his* shepherd, as he soon learned to call him in distinction from the others, who paid him but scant attention. It was a kindly, pleasant face, over-thoughtful perhaps but with health and youth written large under its tan. In the days that followed, the invalid found himself grasping at the strength and energy radiated by this personality, basking in his sunny smile, entertained and quite frequently instructed by his conversation, cheered and encouraged by his practical helpfulness.

If, however, the convalescent was pleased with the shepherd, how much more was the shepherd pleased with the convalescent! Moved at first merely by motives of pity and generosity, he soon took a delight in the presence of the stranger which was wholly inexplicable to himself. He had never met anyone—at least not a very young man like himself—who possessed such a fund of general information and seemed to have such mature judgment. He talked as one who had lived in cities and associated with those who had seen much of that world which was new and strange to this mountain lad who had spent his eager, responsive youth hand-in-hand with Toil and Responsibility, as youth often does in the East.

One day, under the shadow of a great rock which shielded them from the heat of the mid-summer sun, they were talking. "How long sayest thou I have been here, Benjamin?"

"It is eight weeks, Isaac, since I found thee under the bushes yonder, sick with fever."

"Then eight weeks hast thou cared for me, night and day. How knewest thou that I was not a robber, or, worse still, what thy countrymen despise most, a Syrian spy?" The tone was careless and breathed a laugh, but the speaker glanced searchingly at his companion, who, after a moment's silence, replied quietly:

"I stopped but to consider thy pressing need, Isaac, for our Law commandeth us to regard the necessity of the stranger, but if I had thought further, the pack on thy back would have proclaimed thee a peddler, though thy stock be small. Likewise, thy pronunciation showeth that our tongue is native to thee and thou hast an Israelitish name."

Isaac sighed and there sounded in it something of relief. "My mother was of thy nation," he explained, "a captive in Syria, where she married my father, who was of Egyptian blood and a servant in the same house with herself. I am named for some of her people and she spoke to me always in her own language." Then, hastily, as if he feared questions: "But for thee I might have died, an awful, burning death here in the wilderness, without

even a drink of cold water to allay my thirst or a friend to save my body from the vultures."

"Think not of it, Isaac. It is only thy departure on the morrow which saddeneth me. Caring for thee was as balm to a sore heart, better than all the aromatic herbs in Gilead."

Isaac looked questioningly: "A woman?"

The shepherd assented. "From childhood have I had no thought save *of* her and *for* her. When I could make her a home, I desired my father to ask her in marriage of her parents, as is our custom. At first they were willing, as I had believed, but their consent was refused, the maiden being pleasing to a man of greater means. Yet was she true to me. I had it from her own lips and through the mouth of my little sister, Miriam, of whom I have before spoken to thee. All at once the maiden changed. Deaf, dumb, and blind did she become to all that concerned me, and when I would see her they said she was sick, which I cannot believe, and I had to come away without a word of explanation. It troubleth me."

To Isaac, more worldly wise, the reason was plain. "She favoreth the other," he said, "and thou shouldst not cherish the memory of one who hath treated thee with contempt. Canst thou not think of someone else, Benjamin?"

The shepherd laughed in a mirthless way. "None to fill her place, Isaac; nor is it of another she think-

eth. Nay! One there was who always appeared at the spring when I was waiting for my beloved. She was a clever, amusing maid, but a life with her would be like living on honey without any bread."

Isaac nodded in comprehension. "The same have I felt toward all the maidens I ever met save one. Once, as I traveled with my pack, I was able to avert a danger she knew not of, and her face hath been in my memory ever since. I have not wished to dislodge it. She fed wild pigeons, I recall, in a romantic little gorge."

A silence fell between them, each, with fine feeling, unwilling to ask for details not volunteered.

The next day, at parting, Isaac took from his own arm a heavy bracelet of gold and clasped it around Benjamin's. "Not for its value," he insisted, when the shepherd demurred, "but as a covenant of lasting friendship 'twixt thee and me. As thou hast saved my life so doth it belong to thee or thine if in aught I can ever serve thee."

The next minute Benjamin was alone. At the turn of the road Isaac looked back and waved his hand in farewell and the shepherd, with a sigh, turned to his sheep and his constant thoughts of Rachel. He did not know that at that very hour events of considerable importance to both of them were taking place in the little "city" of their nativity.

Noontime, whose brightness had no power to dis-

pel the sorrow which hung over Caleb's household, saw Judith slipping, with a shudder, out of its gloomy portal. Abner was coming up the hill as she started to descend it. She answered his pleasant greeting with assumed diffidence.

"I hasten, my lord, desiring to spend a time with Rachel, who, as thou knowest, hath spent these eight weeks and more in the house and mostly on her bed, suffering from a mysterious sickness none dareth yet to name. Save that she hath long been secretly betrothed to my kinsman, Benjamin, who taketh his sheep to the hills, we know not where, and that her parents are very wroth—yet because thou hast looked with favor upon the maid would I warn thee—"

"I thank thee," he said, slowly, his face somewhat paler than usual, and the two hurried their separate ways.

In strange contradiction to such solicitude, however, Judith did not visit Rachel. She rarely did. It was Miriam who sat by her friend's side telling her of Hannah's plight.

"There is not enough grain and olive oil in the whole city to satisfy Abner's claim and save Eli and Nathan from bondage, nor will he wait for the next barley and wheat to be harvested. As for grapes and olives, they will not be ripe for months. Father hath tried to shame Abner, but he saith he is grieved to be so misunderstood; that Hannah should be grateful

to him for taking upon himself the burden of her sons' support."

Apparently, Rachel was not in a mood for conversation. The younger girl gazed at her in great dejection for a few minutes and a tear splashed down on her hand. "It would be easier to bear other people's troubles, Rachel, if one could help. I am going to bathe thy feverish face and hands and take down thy hair. Thou shalt hold the little mirror of polished bronze that Ezekiel, thy kinsman in Damascus, sent thee." Suiting the action to the word she went on talking: "Damascus must be a very great city, peradventure almost twice as large as ours. Father hath told me about the war between Israel and Syria and the treaty of peace, so that Syrian merchants may come to Israel and a street hath been set aside in Damascus in which our people may dwell."

Rachel seemed to take no more interest in foreign affairs than in those at home, but the little maid was not discouraged. "Thou art more comfortable now. Thou hast been sick ever since that day the heat overcame thee in the gorge when thou wert feeding the pigeons, but thou dost not have to go on being miserable. Thou knowest, the Lord is thy strength and song. I am going to see how Hannah doeth and remind her of this. She abode with us through the night, but now she is in her own house. First, though, I shall sing thee to sleep. Thou seest I have brought my timbrel. Then will I steal softly away."

Having made good her word, Miriam was about to depart when the kindly voice of Rachel's mother detained her: "Stay, Miriam, yet a moment and take to Hannah this little pot of oil. The gift is not much to her that dwelleth in the house of sorrow, but it carrieth a message of sympathy."

Halfway to her destination Miriam met Judith. "I have been seeking for thee," said the older girl. "Knowest thou that we have a guest, a man? He hath come from a distance in the heat and dust, and I have been to draw cool, fresh water wherewith to bathe his hands and feet and so refresh him while thy mother prepareth a meal to set before him."

Miriam hazarded a few guesses as to the identity of their visitor, but Judith shook her head. "It is none whom thou hast mentioned, but who it is I know not. He weareth a mantle."

"Then he is one of the prophets."

"Nay, for he is bald and the prophets wear long hair. Neither hath he the appearance of a fanatic, as do they. Rather, he seemeth like some well-to-do man of the cities, peradventure a merchant. His speech is gracious and gentle and he carrieth a walking stick like any serious-minded, elderly gentleman. He is attended by a younger man and thy father did him great obeisance. Also—"

But Judith was alone. Miriam was running like some wild thing straight to Hannah's house. Out

of breath she stumbled over the threshold and thrust the pot of oil into the woman's hands.

"Hannah—Hannah—the Man of God hath come, my lord Elisha, and even now sitteth at meat in our house. Do thou go quickly. Thy husband was of his young men. Do thou tell him about Abner taking Eli and Nathan as bondmen for debt. Jehovah hath sent him that as God hath been thy strength, he shall now be thy song. Hasten, Hannah," but Hannah was already gone.

Twenty-four hours later Miriam, wild with excitement, paused on the threshold of Rachel's house. Within were voices and while she hesitated as to whether or not to enter, she heard the message.

Abner had sent his friend, after the manner of the East, to speak on the subject of his betrothal to Rachel, not to bring the customary gifts and make necessary arrangements, but to do the rather unusual thing: to withdraw his previous proposal on the plea of her ill-health. The affair was conducted with elaborate civilities on the part of both the emissary and Rachel's parents, hiding the contempt of the one and the rage of the other.

It was a very awed little Miriam but one with shining eyes who held Rachel's hand a few minutes after the messenger had departed. "Art thou not glad?" she whispered.

The older girl nodded slightly, aware of her mother's frown.

"And Benjamin will be so happy," Miriam declared, but Rachel sighed.

"He thinketh no more upon me," she said, and refused to be comforted.

The general gloom of the household was soon overborne, however, by the tidings Miriam had brought. At the feet of the prophet Hannah had knelt in supplication and he had had compassion upon her distress.

"At his command," recited Miriam, joyfully, "we borrowed from our neighbors all the empty vessels possible, then she and Eli and Nathan went into their own house and shut the door. Eli told me what happened. *From the little pot of oil thy mother sent by me, Hannah filled all those vessels!* Then came she again to the Man of God, who was still in our house, and he instructed her what next to do. Now she hath gone to sell the oil and pay Abner. Yet will there be something left, for I heard my lord Elisha say unto her, 'Live thou and thy children of the rest.'"

When the happy comments had died away Miriam stroked her friend's hair. "Why dost thou not ask to be healed, Rachel? Let us go to the Man of God."

But Rachel shook her head. "I must not ask for what I do not want, Miriam, and when Benjamin no longer thinketh upon me, why should I desire to get well?"

CHAPTER IV

CAPTIVES

AUTUMN had come to the Land of Israel. The sun had just lifted a shining face, but in more than one city the inhabitants had been long astir. Before all the more important abodes stood asses, saddled and laden with water-skin and leather provision bag as if for a journey. In a little while could be seen broken lines of riders, singly or in groups, wending their way in slow and dignified fashion on these same sure-footed animals, over the narrow threads of rocky roads which traversed hill and vale. All faces were turned in one direction—Jerusalem. The master of the house was on his way to the Feast of Tabernacles, or the Feast of the Ingathering, as it was sometimes called.

The air had in it a hint of frost, being too chill for rain, but nobody minded, certainly not a misty-eyed little maid who was walking with her two travelers to the brow of the hill.

"I believe thou art glad to see us go, Miriam," said Caleb, teasingly.

"Oh, very glad, father. It is right thou shouldst appear before the Lord with thine offerings, for he hath dealt bountifully with us, and I am glad thou

canst take mother to visit her kindred. Long hath it been since she hath seen them, and it will make her so happy, but"—the voice trembled a little—"I would be gladder if this were the day thou wert coming home."

Her parents exchanged glances.

"Thou knowest that the olive trees had a good crop and the vineyard. Likewise the flock hath been profitable and thou art thinking of the nose-ring we shall bring thee, or was it anklets thou didst choose?"

"I am much more concerned as to her conduct, Caleb, than I am as to her ornaments," put in Sarah, hastily. "Remember, Miriam, I shall expect thee to behave thyself wisely, in a perfect way."

"Yea, mother, but when thou and father art gone, how will I know what is wise and perfect?"

Sarah regarded her severely. "The Law of the Lord is perfect. See that thou keep it. The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. Remember it. The commandment of the Lord is right, enlightening the eyes. Meditate upon it. There is no chance for a mistake if God is in all thy thoughts. Miriam, wilt thou keep the Lord always before thy face?"

"Yea, mother."

"And thou wilt not be turned aside to the right hand nor to the left, no matter what influence is brought to bear upon thee?" Sarah glanced apprehensively back at Judith, standing in the open door.

"Nay, mother."

They had come to the place of parting, Caleb walking ahead, leading the two asses. Judith could not hear what was said, but she could see that the farewells were lingering and affectionate. A great wave of longing for her own parents swept over her and she turned into the house to avoid the unsympathetic and the curious. She did not know, therefore, that when the travelers were quite hidden from sight in the distance, Miriam sank upon the ground in a little heap of wretchedness.

Neither did Judith nor anyone else guess that at that very moment the mother was nervously fingering the bridle of her beast. "Long have I wanted to take this journey, Caleb, but it were easier to talk of than to do. I will go back. I cannot leave the little maid."

"Nonsense, Sarah," and a stranger would have noticed that Caleb's voice was none too steady, although he affected cheerfulness. "It will do thee much good to have a visit among thy kindred."

"But thinkest thou all will go well while we are away?" Sarah was still hesitant.

"How could they go ill with Hannah to stay with Miriam and Judith, and Eli and Nathan to see to the animals? Besides, we shall be gone but a few days. They will be sorry to see us return, for youth joyeth with youth. Mount, I pray thee, and let us be going, for our pace will be slow at the best."

Reluctantly she yielded to his entreaties, but with many a backward glance and an anxiety which seemed wholly unwarranted.

Along the path they had just traversed came Rachel and gathered Miriam in her arms. "I feared to find thee so, little maid," she comforted. "Nay," compassionately, "thou must not weep. And if thou wilt dry thine eyes I will tell thee a secret so dear it hath not been whispered before."

It was a rosy and radiant Rachel who was speaking now. "Knowest thou that when Benjamin came home a few days ago he told me something that made me very happy? And when he cometh *next* time we are to be publicly betrothed. My parents have consented and I have my wedding veil. We must go back to thy dwelling now, but some day, when there is none to see but thee, I shall try it on."

She raised the limp figure and, talking of the future to divert the thoughts of her grief-stricken little friend, guided her along the well-known path toward home.

At about the same hour, somewhere out on the Israelitish hills, a shepherd was leading his flock northward under pressure of military escort. His face was sullen, but all at once he laughed: "It took three and more coming to take captive one shepherd of Israel. These Syrian dogs!" He laughed again, contemptuously. The soldier nearest, under-

standing the intent if not the words, struck him with the broadside of his short sword, and the shepherd laughed no more.

The monotony of merely going forward was relieved a little later by the passing of a band of horsemen, coming south. The shepherd listened apathetically to what was evidently, although he understood not a word, an exchange of civilities and compliments upon the capture of so large and fine a flock. He glanced carelessly at the gaily bedecked horse of the leader and then at the man himself. It was a young man, and all at once the shepherd's indifference vanished. He had the face of a friend! Undoubtedly he and his flock would soon be free.

Running forward quickly, he knelt and threw up one arm, exposing to view a broad gold bracelet of exquisite design, by that movement plainly seeking recognition. The young officer appeared startled for an instant, then he assumed an air of unconcern and with careless farewells to the soldier-escort of the flock, he and his men rode on.

The shepherd crimsoned at the rebuff. "I could swear that were Isaac," he muttered, "even to the pallor of his recent illness. Thus hath he kept his pledge, a promise he made voluntarily. So would a viper repay the fool who warmed it by his fire!"

Turning, he found himself the object of mockery and ridicule. Unfortunately, he allowed rage to get the better of discretion. He was captured, but not

conquered. With a swift movement he struck one of his tormentors a stinging blow full in the face, but a fellow soldier used his ever ready spear, and after that, Benjamin the shepherd went his way limping.

It was the next day that Miriam was helping Hannah make butter. That is to say, a goatskin bag, nearly full of milk, was suspended out of doors from the center of three crossed poles, and they were shaking and beating it with great regularity and violence. In due course of time a product not at all resembling the butter to which we are accustomed rewarded their labors. With a sigh, the moist and dripping bag was carried into the house and hung in the coolest spot possible that its curdled contents might ferment and be used, as needed, to give relish to otherwise dry bread.

The task finished, Hannah betook herself to her own home to be gone an hour or two. Miriam, left alone, dropped down in the doorway. All day she had been unaccountably heavy of spirit, "not sick," she had told Hannah in answer to a solicitous inquiry, "but just not glad of anything."

Was it only yesterday her parents had started on their journey? It seemed like a week. And what strange sights they must be seeing now! Very strange indeed could they have seen through Miriam's eyes, for her thoughts were soon jumbled

by the sprites of Dreamland. When she awoke the afternoon shadows were lengthening. Hannah had not returned, and where was Judith? If she were late, Hannah would be sure to tell father and mother and they would be displeased. Why did she not come?

Miriam was dismayed, then came a thought, the horror of which sent her running to the top of the hill, where the path began to descend to the valley below: suppose Judith had been bitten by a viper out of the brushwood she had gone to gather for fuel! She was nowhere in sight, although she had been absent since a little after noon. Slowly Miriam walked down the hill, gazing long and searchingly in all directions until she stood in the silence and loneliness of the deserted fields. How find anybody or anything among those rank grasses, grown taller than herself now that the harvests were over? Yet at that very instant Judith must be lying among them somewhere, sick perhaps unto death.

Running hither and thither and thoroughly alarmed, Miriam essayed calling. The third time her hail was answered, but not in the way she had expected. Not Judith but Nathan—Nathan, pale and frightened; Nathan, entreating her silence but speaking himself in hoarse, excited whispers.

“Hush, Miriam, the valley is full of soldiers!”

She was amazed, incredulous, and he indignant at her unbelief. “Thinkest thou, Miriam, I know not

a soldier when I see one?" he panted as they ran. "Was not every man covered from neck to thigh, back and front, with his breast-plate of bronze scales? Did not each wear a helmet and carry a shield on his left arm and a buckler¹ slung from his girdle? Some had long and heavy spears; some, bows and arrows and some had slings, with the stones for them in bags around their necks."

"But, Nathan," suggested Miriam, weakly, "peradventure our king passeth this way with his body-guard."

"Would our king rob Abner's storehouses in the field? Nay, and these have not Israelitish faces. Besides, they came on horses which they have left at the head of the valley, and thou shouldst know that horses mean war. Canst thou not run faster, Miriam? We must warn quickly mother and the city."

The little maid's face blanched. "I must find Judith. Do thou go on and I—" Nathan's remonstrances were cut short by the sudden appearance, out of the tall grass, of a man dressed just as the lad had described. He laid a detaining hand on each, addressing them in their own language, but his pronunciation showed that it was acquired.

"This time to-morrow," pointing to the village on the hilltop, "our archers will have bent their bows and made ready their arrows and sent fire and de-

¹ "A short sword buckled to the belt or girdle."

struction into the midst of thy city. None shall be left alive save such as we take into captivity."

Miriam wrung her hands and wept, but Nathan spoke defiantly, with passion in his tones: "Thou knowest not that we of Israel, especially we of the tribe of Zebulun, fight long and hard, jeoparding our lives unto the death."

An evil smile distorted the man's features. "Thinkest thou we know not that thy men are away at the feast in Jerusalem? To-morrow this time thy land shall be desolate from Jerusalem northward, and we will take captive thy flocks and thy herds—"

The speaker was interrupted by the arrival of another soldier, dressed much the same, but the more elaborate ornamentation of his shield, and his richly decorated helmet with its crest, denoted a higher rank. All this, however, was quite lost upon Nathan and Miriam. They noted only that he was very young—older than Eli, perhaps, but doubtless younger than Benjamin—that he bent upon them a look not in the least malevolent, as was that of their captor, and that when he spoke to them, also in their own tongue, his speech was as free from foreign accent as their own. Apparently, he had authority, for at a word, the first soldier withdrew.

"I happened to overhear," he told the children. "Fear not nor believe what Lemuel hath said. He was but teasing thee. Our men went no farther

south than the Valley of Jezreel, which is a long way north of Jerusalem, and we have not come to make war upon the people but only to take foodstuffs."

The two gazed at him doubtfully. "Peradventure," sobbed Miriam, "when thou art asleep the other soldier will do these terrible things."

The young man laughed, a mirthful laugh. "Lemuel? Nay, he could not. We have but a few men and," with some little pride, "I have been given charge of this band."

He glanced at the rapidly declining sun and his next words were more decisive. "See, it is almost sunset. We did not come to take prisoners, but thou wilt understand that I cannot let thee go home to give the alarm, and afterward thou wilt prefer Syria to Israel."

Miriam was distressed anew.

The young captain reasoned gently: "To-night thy household will think thou art with friends somewhere, but they cannot seek thee in the darkness, among the half-wild, scavenger dogs that roam thy villages at night. By dawn they will have other matters to engage their attention. Thou wilt go with me now to our encampment in the gorge by the spring. Come," to Miriam, "thou shalt have a corner of the prophet's cave all to thyself to-night with a leopard's skin for a covering. Thou wilt like that, for it was given me by the best man I ever knew, a shepherd of Israel. And thou," turning to

Nathan, "shalt have the opposite corner, but I have only one leopard skin and that is for the little maid."

There was something very attractive, very sincere in his address. He seemed to understand their terror, their distrust.

"Be not afraid," he said, "thou shalt be well treated. If not, it will be because thou dost not treat *us* well. To-night we encamp. To-morrow we start for Damascus, but thou shalt both have good care all the way. Isaac pledgeth thee his word!"

CHAPTER V

JOURNEYING

WHEN dawn came Miriam was in a heavy slumber. Strange surroundings, terror, and grief had taken as large a part in keeping her long awake as her bed on the hard floor or the chill dampness of the cave. She was still sobbing. The young captain bent over her pityingly for an instant and tucked in the leopard's skin to keep her warm, then, leaving a guard at the door, he and the rest of his men departed upon their errand. When she awoke she discerned Nathan's sullen face in the half light, and it aroused her to an immediate comprehension of their plight.

He whispered to her: "Thinkest thou I shall go to Damascus a captive? Did the Man of God save me from bondage in my own country only to go into worse in a heathen land? Nay, but I shall escape, and when I am gone be not anxious for me nor unhappy for thyself. I shall come back to my mother and Eli, and some day we shall rescue thee. Do thou put confidence in my words. Look here."

He bared his arm and shoulder and with gentle fingers she touched the welts and bruises, exclaiming compassionately.

He was still unconquered, defiant. "The soldiers gave these to me."

"But not when thou wert good and obedient, Nathan."

"Nay," he admitted, and fell into a shamefaced silence.

She considered a moment. "It seemeth to me, Nathan, there be times when we cannot help *what* we do, only *how* we do. Dost thou not remember how our father Joseph was sold into bondage in Egypt? If he had refused to make himself useful or been unfaithful in his tasks—"

Nathan placed his fingers warningly on his lips and Miriam ceased speaking as the soldiers swarmed into the cave, so putting an end to conversation.

Breakfast had long been over for the men, but in the hurry of departure the youthful commander did not forget a handful of raisins and dried figs, together with some parched corn, for his small prisoners. He insisted that they eat, then, taking the hand of each, they left the prophet's cave, turned their backs upon the gorge, and walked leisurely the valley road to its head, where the animals awaited them.

"Hast thou ever been on a horse, little maid?"

"I never saw one but once. That was when the king's messenger passed this way."

"I shall have to set thee in front of me, on my horse. He will go faster than an ass but not so fast

as a camel at top speed, and in six days, or maybe seven, we shall be in Damascus. We travel slowly to accommodate our speed to that of our beasts of burden, heavily laden with stores from thy rich little valley. The lad will be on another horse in front of one of the men, but they are rough and boisterous. Wouldst thou not rather ride with me?"

Without waiting for assent he lifted her gently to the back of the animal, gave a few directions to his men, and the column began to move. There was no saddle and she found herself slipping. She grasped desperately at the horse's mane, but Isaac had anticipated this and held her firmly with one arm.

"It will be easier when thou art more used to riding," he comforted, "but I will not let thee fall."

A long, last look at the village on the hillside and then, with eyes that saw not for tears and a heart that seemed to weigh much more than her sturdy little body, Miriam left behind all that was dear to her and began the journey into a far country.

An hour later a maiden climbed slowly and painfully the steep path up from the valley. At the top she met a woman with horrible cuts across the face and body, weak from loss of blood and leaning on the shoulder of a lad whose right arm hung useless at his side.

"Art thou hurt, Judith?"

"Nay, Hannah, but if thou hadst fled from one terror to another ever since yesterday afternoon when I first beheld the soldiers coming up the valley, and had finally lain concealed for hours, not daring to move lest thou be discovered, chilled by the heavy night dews, stiff and cramped, frightened and lacking food, thou also wouldst walk with difficulty."

Eli was horrified, reproachful: "Thou knewest the Syrians were upon us and madest no effort to warn the city? We might have put up a better defense or saved some of our supplies by hiding them. As it is, many have suffered, a few even unto death."

He paused and looked shudderingly at a swiftly approaching cloud which darkened the air, then quickly drew his mother inside the nearest house. "The vultures descend, having scented their prey from afar, yet few were slain and they only because of desperate resistance. The pale young man, scarce older than I, who seemed to command the party, had his men well under control. He reproved the soldier who smote thee, mother, and stooped over thee with horror in his eyes, himself tying the cloth which saved thee from bleeding to death and which I could not tie with one hand. I could love him were he other than a heathen and a robber!"

Turning to Judith, who had followed them, his voice became stern: "Knowest thou that famine

stareth us in the face—and thou mightest have saved it?”

The girl's tones were aggrieved: “Gladly would I have borne tidings, Eli, if I could have done so with safety, but I should have been captured. They have taken Nathan and Miriam, and a veiled maiden rideth in the rear who somehow reminded me of Rachel.”

Hannah clasped Judith's arm: “Thou sawest Nathan and Miriam? Tell me—” and Judith, who had seen and heard almost everything of the eventful hours just past, told the story.

Meanwhile Miriam had left the village-crowned hills, the fertile valleys, the scattered oak groves; crossed a tree-studded, grassy meadow, a tangle of ferns and brushwood, and descended a gorge in the midst of which tumbled and roared and foamed a stream. The atmosphere seemed heavy with a heat not derived from the sun.

“Hast thou seen the Jordan before, little maid?”

Her answer was lost in the confusion of fording the river. At a place sufficiently shallow the horses were led down the steep and slippery bank, alarmed the moment their feet rested in the soft mud; terrified on reaching the shingly bottom to feel the swift tug of the current and the coldness of the rapid waters; cold after their enforced dip and taking quickly and easily the cliffs and steppes to the broad

plateau above, which seemed the higher because of the depression of the Jordan Valley. The wind swept chill out of the snow-covered mountains to the north, toward which they were turning their faces, but after the heaviness of the valley they had just left, the air was exhilarating and fragrant with herbage.

"We are east of the Jordan now, little maid," explained the young captain. "Seest thou how much easier it is to travel? It will be fairly level all the way into Damascus. Thou wilt see continual passing to and fro; much cattle and many camels and asses, and people that will look strange to thee, but fear not."

He smiled at her reassuringly, but her eyes held a far-away look of inexpressible sadness, at sight of which he became silent.

On the sixth night of the encampment, Isaac was decidedly out of sorts. Several things had gone wrong and the party was much overdue. There had first been trouble among the pack-animals. This adjusted, it had been found that one of the soldiers, whose wounds had been thought of little consequence, had grown rapidly worse, and, lastly, their boy-captive had escaped. The veiled woman was gone likewise, but that mattered little.

In a retired spot, somewhat removed from the noises of the camp, they had spread a goat's-hair

tent and built a fire at a little distance so that its light would not play unpleasantly upon the features so soon to be relaxed in death. Isaac, who had taken the care of the sick man upon himself, watched alone save for Miriam, who lay asleep in one corner of the tent. For six days now he had been solicitous for her comfort, not from any personal interest but as a matter of war economics. It would be awkward if fright or cold or hardship should result in her illness and they so far from Damascus. On her part, the little maid was losing her fear of this young man, who treated her with no unkindness or lack of gentle consideration.

Lost in thought, he sat gazing moodily into the fire. Odd about the woman! Doubtless she had now joined herself to some one of the caravans they were constantly passing. Lemuel had described her as a camp hanger-on, and her veil was evidence of her loose moral character, since neither matron nor maid of good repute at that period went veiled save at marriage or while journeying, yet for six days she had shown every sign of shrinking timidity, and he had seen to it that she was treated with respect. He had asked Nathan if he knew her, but the boy had replied sullenly in the negative without turning his head. He had asked the little maid, but her eyes had been full of tears. For several reasons it had not seemed best to allow speech between the captives, and so the mystery had remained.

He had not himself questioned her, being irritated that she rode the horse he had brought for the maiden whose face had been in his memory ever since that day he saw her feeding pigeons in the gorge. He had meant to show special leniency to her family and thus secure their consent to a marriage, scorning to take her an unwilling captive; to force her into an alliance she would abhor, a sin of which certain other captains he could name had been guilty. However, the maid could not be found and he bothered his brain with a thousand conjectures.

That very day a puzzling circumstance had occurred. While searching for the fugitive lad, Isaac had caught the flutter of a garment and followed it straight to its hiding place. He had not found the boy, but this woman had knelt before him, clasping her hands—wondrously pretty hands, he had noticed—and in a voice remarkably soft and sweet had besought him to leave her. He had hesitated, and then Chivalry had gone out to succor Distress. Planting himself in front of her retreat until the last of his men had passed, he had followed them without one backward glance.

Thinking about it now, a doubt of Lemuel's tale came to his mind for the first time. The veil might be explained away, but not that refinement of voice, not—a movement by the fire attracted his attention. He stared incredulously, for there, hovering over the blaze, was the girl of his dreams. It could be

no other than the face he had carried in his memory all these months. Stranger even than the apparition, she had been the veiled woman, for the garment's tatters were even now drawn tightly about her shivering form. Behind the girl somebody appeared and clutched her by the arm. It was a boy—the boy—but Isaac did not move. Nathan's alarm exhibited itself in his voice.

"I awoke and missed thee. Rachel, knowest thou not that whosoever hath kindled this fire is not far off?" He scanned the darkness anxiously, but the outlines of the tent were not visible where it lay, outside the pale of the firelight. "Come, Rachel. Hast thou no fear?"

Her tones were the same low, musical ones he had heard that day: "I was so cold, Nathan, so cold. I watched a long time and saw no one, the soldiers from whom we escaped being some distance away as thou knowest, and I became persuaded that if any but an angel had built this fire it could be none other than a friend. Even now I feel it so."

Nevertheless, the boy's entreaties were not to be denied and after a time she allowed herself to be led away to their place of concealment. Isaac noted its direction. He was sick at heart. To think he had had the opportunity he craved and had not known it. He could have saved her these hardships and had not done so. And then a savage joy possessed him. She was his beyond all power of inter-

ference. He knew her hiding place, but he would be careful not to frighten her by any vehemence of word or action. He would treat her gently, as was due the maiden who would be acceptable in the great house he called "home." He would first provide for her comfort and teach her to trust him, then, when he offered her honorable marriage, she would accept gladly, gratefully. It was all so simple. Perhaps it had been best, after all, that things had turned out this way instead of—

A little hand was suddenly slipped into his and a little voice cried excitedly: "I saw them by the fire: Rachel, the maid to whom my brother Benjamin is betrothed, and Nathan. Was it not nice she had her wedding veil to cover herself before all these strange, rough men? But Benjamin keepeth my father's flock out on the hills of Israel and knoweth not how it fareth with Rachel. Wilt thou send him word?"

The soldier was stunned. He gazed at Miriam stupidly for a moment, for several moments. At last he seized her face between his hands and held it where the firelight shone full upon it. "Thy name, little maid," he commanded, sharply.

"Miriam, daughter of Caleb."

He fell back a pace, repeating the words as if to recall memories: "Miriam, daughter of Caleb . . . thy brother keeping his father's flock on the hills of Israel. . . . Benjamin, sayest thou? . . . Thy vil-

lage Hannathon, whose outgoing is the Valley of Jiptha-el. . . . *Benjamin!* Ah, strangely familiar hath thy appearance been to me. I wondered whom thou didst remind me of. And now that I recall it, not only have I heard thy name but I have seen thee. Thou wert the little maid with Rachel in the gorge, and there was a lad older than Nathan. 'Eli,' his brother, sayest thou? And I have taken captive Benjamin's sister! Would that I had known it six days ago!"

He resumed his old position near the door of the tent, his head buried in his hands. "And this maiden, Rachel—Benjamin's betrothed? Nay, it cannot be."

But Miriam said it was; said it with so much detail he could not doubt; said it with a calm matter-of-factness that was torture unspeakable to the listener, who was ill with disappointment; rebellious at the thought of failure in that which he had resolved; stubbornly determined to admit no defeat as long as there was one ray of hope. At last, finding him quite unresponsive, Miriam crept away to her leopard's skin bed and sobbed herself to sleep, not knowing that he was so young and inexperienced and pain so new and strange that he knew not how to meet it.

That night he fought the hardest battle of his life, a battle not with flesh and blood, which were easier to overcome, but with his own undisciplined spirit, and in the gray of the morning, as he watched

a life embark on the Great Unknown, the better part of him won. When Miriam awoke he greeted her with the friendly smile she had come to expect. They would be on the march very soon, he said, but before they started perhaps they had better talk over something he had in mind, and then they fell to planning together for the relief of the wayfarers, Rachel and Nathan.

CHAPTER VI

DAMASCUS

THE ninth day, shortly after noon, Isaac's company neared Damascus. They traveled slowly, carrying the dead body of their comrade, but not too slowly for Miriam, to whom grief for the past and uncertainty as to the future loomed larger than the delights of new experiences. They paused a moment on the heights above and looked down upon the city.

Isaac pointed with pride: "Seest thou, little maid, that the buildings, crowded so closely together and all covered with gray plaster, make Damascus look like a pearl. It is a pearl set in emeralds, for it lieth in the midst of fragrant gardens and shady orchards which entirely surround it, and in which thou mayest travel for hours on hours before reaching the desert. All this is wrought by our two good friends, the River Abana and the River Pharpar, which hath made Damascus possible. Without them this would be but desert sands. The Pharpar flows through the plains to the south of us, but the Abana, like a faithful servant to her mistress, the Queen of Cities, washes off the dust of her feet. Every street and every dwelling hath its marble foun-

tain supplied by the Abana's cold and sparkling waters. Freely doth it flow for rich and poor alike. Thou shalt see its wonders and its beauty."

He touched his horse and they moved on, leaving the exhilarating air of the hills, traversing roads which lay between fascinating vistas of garden and orchard, such as he had described, and finally entering the great, crowded gate. To Miriam the city presented more perils than the wilderness. The bustle of the streets appeared like confusion; the gayly colored garments everywhere looked odd, even fantastic, while the cries of the merchandise vendors and the constant din of conversation in many voices and many languages were bewildering. She drew closer to the young captain, imploring, fearful.

He smiled reassuringly. "We stop here, nay, not to dismount but only to leave the men. This is the 'barracks' where I live when I am not at home, but thou and I go further."

She grew faint with apprehension. Was she now to be sold as a slave? But what else could one expect in this terrible heathen city?

They were taking the "farther ride" of which he had spoken. "Seest thou this splendid temple, little maid? Notice its magnificence and its vast size. It is the House of Rimmon, the sun-god of the Syrians. Nay, not *my* god. If I believe at all, and sometimes I wonder how it is possible to know which god is the true one among so many, it is Jehovah,

whom I was taught to worship even as thou, my mother being a captive from the Land of Israel like thee."

He had not meant to bring that pained expression to Miriam's face. All at once he noticed how small she was and how forlorn. His voice became soothing. "I am taking thee to the house where she went, where she grew up and married my father, who was chief steward there and an Egyptian. I was born in that house and call it 'home' even yet, for I am much with my master. It is the House of Naaman, commander-in-chief of the armies of Syria. I think thou wilt wait upon his wife, Adah. My sister, Milcah, hath a position of authority among the female servants, and if she seemeth to thee at first somewhat severe, thou must remember that she hath much care, so much that her heart hath great ado to show itself. But peradventure" (questioningly) "thou wouldst enjoy a Quest for the Hidden Heart?"

Her answer was prevented by their arrival at the largest abode Miriam had ever seen, and the next hour was a very trying one. She did not meet the mistress she was to serve. Instead, she was taken straight to Milcah, the soldier's sister, the Lady of the Hidden Heart, whose welcome was critical rather than cordial. After a little while Isaac bade her good-by for the present, holding her hand tightly.

"Thou wilt be happy here, and I will come often to see how thou doest. Thou must feel free to tell

me everything, just as thou wouldst talk with thy brother, Benjamin."

But she would not let him depart. She was in an agony of terror, clinging to him and begging him piteously not to leave her.

He was perplexed and distressed. Stooping, he caressed her; took her in his arms and attempted to soothe her in quite a big-brother fashion; told her about his debt to Benjamin, which he should repay to her; reassured her about the kindness of those among whom he had brought her; promised to come every day; tried to divert her attention to the fountain in the peaceful courtyard and the other beauties around them; sought to arouse her courage and inspire hope. After a time she became calm and suffered him to leave, but before going he had a few sharp words with his sister, Milcah, who had looked on coldly, impatiently, at these proceedings.

"As if I had naught to do but act as child's nurse! Assuredly she will be well treated. Hath anything else ever been known in the House of Naaman?"

With this ungracious promise he had to be content, but never before had he taken his way to the barracks with such a heavy heart. He paused two or three times and looked back, as if debating whether or not to return, but finally went on. Meanwhile, with expedition and no waste of sympathy, Miriam was bathed, under Milcah's direction, and dressed in garments hastily adapted for the purpose

out of those intended for a much larger maid. The rest of the afternoon time dragged. Miriam, very forlorn indeed, was yet very brave, as she had promised Isaac to be. She expected to be put to work immediately, to be given tasks that would try her strength and patience to the utmost, but, apparently, there was nothing for her to do.

Venturing into the courtyard, she observed that if the dwelling looked large on the outside, it was immense within and sheltered a household so numerous that the arrival of one more made no difference whatever. Somewhat later she had her supper, a bounteous meal that she could not swallow for the lump in her throat, and then Milcah sent her to bed in a large room with several of the maid servants. It was a softer bed than any she had ever known, but not one of ease. She lay there thinking, thinking until the intolerable pain in her throat was at last relieved by tears, but she was careful to smother the sobs lest she disturb those whose regular breathing told her they were asleep. She could reach out her hand and touch them, they were so near, yet she was alone, quite, quite alone! No one cared about her except, strangely enough, the soldier who had brought her hither! If she could only cuddle down in her mother's arms, or her father's! Oh, the sobs would not be stifled! What if the Lady of the Hidden Heart should hear?

As if in answer to this despairing cry, Milcah

stood, looking down upon her. "Exactly what I feared," she commented, "and to-morrow no work will be done because the sound of thy weeping to-night will go forth to disturb the household. Thus is mischief wrought by a brother's thoughtlessness. Do thou come into the room with me, and if thou *must* weep, none will be distressed, for much care maketh me always wakeful."

Not unkindly though entirely without tenderness, Miriam was assisted to make the change, but the fountain of tears seemed frozen. For the rest of the night she lay with wide-open eyes, staring but unseeing, sick to the very soul. Yet did she not suffer alone. From his comparatively hard couch over in the barracks, Isaac all at once sprang up, alert, listening. Noiselessly he crossed the room, opened a door, and stepped out into the starlight. Still were the voices of traffic and people which had so terrified Miriam that day. The city slumbered. He looked across roof after roof to two which towered above the others, ghostlike in the whiteness of their plastered exteriors. One was the palace, the other the House of Naaman.

A long, long while he stood there, then he returned to his bed, laughing softly. "I grow fanciful," he said to himself. "I dreamed I heard the sobbing of the little maid. As if I could at this distance, or as if she were weeping when she hath doubtless been asleep these many hours!"

Yet for some reason the soldier slept but fitfully the remainder of the night. Into his passive brain swarmed long-forgotten tales he had heard at his mother's knee: tales of her captivity; of her loneliness and home-sickness; but because he had known her only in days of contentment and prosperity, they had seemed to him but as tales. Now he understood. With features drawn as if in pain he groaned: "If only, ah, if only!"

In the morning he went home very early, only to find that the little maid was too weak and ill to rise.

His sister spoke her mind without reserve. "I am not pleased, Isaac, that thou shouldst have brought this child hither. She will be much trouble and little help. We can do nothing now except endure it, but I hope thou wilt never take captive another maid."

He promised fervently, and Milcah surveyed his retreating form with great satisfaction. "When I talk to Isaac," she told herself, "always can I cause him to see the right, and no other woman hath such influence with him—so far."

It was truly a wonderful house to which Miriam had come. In the first place it had no front door. The outside was just a blank wall of gray plaster with a few small openings, very high up, and instead of a door there was a gate: a large, highly ornamented, metal gate at which a keeper always stood.

From this you will understand that none of the rooms looked out upon the street save through those little, latticed openings above everybody's heads, the real doors and windows being on the other side (the inside), where they opened upon a wide veranda and then upon a square courtyard. You could stand in one doorway, for example, and see rows and rows of rooms facing the four sides of this courtyard but not opening into each other.

You might think you would miss seeing the street, but how could you when the courtyard had its fountain and grass and flowers and trees and even birds? All of the courtyards were pretty and peaceful, even that where the animals were kept, the word "all" being used advisedly, for while most houses had one court or two or three at most, this one had seven. You would get lost trying to find your way about. The rooms were large and high, and so clean and well furnished! On three sides were low and wide benches, where you sat in the daytime and slept at night on the soft cushions and thick mattresses which were never put away. There was nothing else in these apartments, but, of course, there was nothing else to want except the queer little pans containing lighted wood or charcoal which would be brought in when it was cold.

The portion of the building set aside for the use of the master and mistress and their guests had not more but only more elegant furniture. Here the

courtyard was paved with marble and inside the apartments the low and wide benches were made of carved cedar inlaid with ivory and mother-of-pearl and tortoise-shell in intricate designs. Here the cushions were covered with beautifully colored silks, the mattresses with heavier material, and there were curtains of silk and linen and rugs spread down to walk upon. Miriam, surveying this magnificence surreptitiously, decided that while it was quite right and proper in such a place and for such a purpose, it was entirely unnecessary for the rest of the household. With the rooms and verandas all floored and kept so clean, who would need carpets? And there were almost no ants or mice! As for cushions, silk would not wear nearly so long, she was sure, as the sheep-skin and goat-skin stuffed with wool which were so plentiful in the other apartments. The master, Naaman, must be very rich to maintain such a splendid dwelling. It was awe-inspiring just to contemplate its glories.

Out of doors it was even more interesting. You could go up a stone staircase in the corner of one of the courts and come out on the roof. You need not be afraid. There was no danger. It was only one story high—although that was very high indeed—and the roof was flat. Besides, the wall built around the edge would keep you from falling. You could see so much and so far! You could look down into the narrow and crowded streets of Damascus itself,

where brilliantly garbed throngs were constantly coming and going on interminable errands, and beyond that to miles of verdure and swamp land and several swift, silvery streams, offshoots of the Pharpar and the Abana, and beyond that still to the long, low-lying bluish-purple hills and the dun-colored desert. It would be just according to your mood whether or not your gaze returned to Damascus and fastened itself upon the one other building more pretentious than this: the palace where dwelt King Ben-hadad and his court, and then wandered off to the three great gates of Damascus, through which many entered and some never returned.

There were numerous people in the household of Naaman, almost as many, she was sure, as lived in a whole "city" in Israel, so it was not strange they should have different languages. How very dissimilar each individual was from the other! Odd that we should all have eyes and ears and noses and mouths and hair and yet no two look alike! The only person of the entire household whose ways and speech were the least familiar was Milcah, sister to the young soldier who had brought her hither, and Milcah was much, much older than her brother and much, much harder to please.

Isaac's daily visits and trifling gifts of fruit or flowers, at first received listlessly, gradually acquired greater value in Miriam's eyes until they were the only bright spots on an otherwise monotonous ho-

rizon. The marvels of her new home had no charms for her at first. They dawned upon her gradually as, day after day, with wan face and lagging footsteps, and in response to Isaac's encouragement, she roamed through the big house, smiling wistfully upon those who were often too busy to smile in response. She was not resentful. The hurt came in the fact that they were absorbed in their own affairs, in which she had no part. And in Hannathon she had been so necessary!

CHAPTER VII

WAYFARERS

THE western or southwestern gate of Damascus, that which looked toward Israel and Egypt, had seen much coming and going of late. Varied features and varied dispositions, people large and small, old and young, bond and free, soldiers and civilians, on all manner of business and pleasure they had passed, but never a couple more likely to attract attention than the maiden and the boy who now approached. There was something inexpressibly gentle and refined in her appearance which contrasted oddly with her tattered garments and the leopard's skin drawn closely around her. The boy seemed more fitted for the wilderness and the hardships they had evidently endured.

They were talking low and eagerly. "Thinkest thou, Rachel," with a touch of scorn, "that the Lord would send an angel in these times and to us as he did to our fathers?"

She was sweetly reasonable. "Then how dost thou explain the fire with no one near it the night when I thought I should die with the cold; and this leopard's skin we found next morning near the embers; and the food—so much we have had enough

and to spare; and the water-skin filled with life-giving water for which we thirsted; and even these strips of cloth to bind up our bleeding feet, cut on the sharp rocks, bruised on the rough road? Nay, no matter what thou sayest, Nathan, I have learned that Jehovah is merciful and gracious, full of loving-kindness and tender mercies with which we have been surrounded. Indeed, now that our perils are nearly over, I feel that all I have gone through hath been but a spiritual experience. The Lord hath been my strength, just as Miriam told me, and he is about to become my song. Soon we shall reach the home of my kinsman, Ezekiel, where we shall not only be safe and well cared for ourselves, but he will know what to do concerning Miriam."

"Look out, Rachel!" Nathan was glaring after a man with a heavy load who had stumbled against them. "A good thing it is that the road is straight and smooth. Keep thou close to me and watch thy steps."

They had need to. As they proceeded the travel increased. They were jostled; they jumped quickly out of the way of those who rode, only to be pushed in another direction by those who walked; they met frowns and ill-natured remarks and, what was harder to bear, smiles and unmistakable jests. They had about concluded that Might rather than Right was the rule of the highway when their opinion was confirmed. As they came within the shadow of the

city gates, but before they could enter, they were espied by a gay party, looking for sport.

By the very simple device of joining hands, a circle was formed around the two unfortunates and they were thus entirely at the will of their tormentors. Nathan's rage and Rachel's entreaties merely added to the amusement. The circle advanced and retreated, dragging its victims along with it. They were mimicked with exaggerated pantomime. They were forced into ridiculous and undignified postures. One, bolder or more facetious than the rest, indulged in hair-pulling and pinching.

The roars of laughter attracted the attention of passers-by, who joined the gathering, some to jeer and encourage, others to inquire and protest. The crowd grew, the noise increased, the road was obstructed and, trying to force a passage, many came to angry arguments and finally to blows. The excitement was quelled only by the arrival of soldiers, who finally hurried to the scene and in no gentle manner dispersed the mob. To Rachel, bruised and humiliated, this was a welcome relief. She did not notice the curious gaze of the soldiers, the changing expression on the face of one, nor that another looked at her intently for a moment, then, urging his horse to full speed, set off in the direction of the House of Naaman.

Nathan, with wits sharpened by terror, lost none of these things nor a host of others, and hastily

came to the conclusion that their deliverance was cause only for additional fear. He clutched Rachel's hand: "We must go back as we came. Hear-est thou? We cannot go into the city to-day. Dost thou not see that these are the soldiers from whom we escaped? They will know me and guess whom thou art, even without thy veil."

He was violently pulling backward; the crowd, so long detained and anxious to make up for lost time, surging forward. As well try to stem the Jordan with bare hands! They were swept apart, and before Rachel realized it, she stood within the portals of Damascus, dismayed and alone. With Miriam in captivity and Nathan lost, it was more than ever imperative that she find Ezekiel and that without delay, but how? She stood at one side of the busy footway, anxiously waiting to see if Nathan would join her. When he did not and she found herself again attracting attention, she singled out one in the hurrying throng and appealed to him timidly: "Canst thou direct me to the House of Ezekiel in the street of the merchants of Israel?"

The man looked at her, shook his head, and answered in a language she did not understand. Others she tried, but with no better success. They were not unkind, merely uncomprehending—and indifferent. Peradventure if she walked along slowly, constantly seeking, constantly asking, she might—she must—somewhere discover one of her own

people, or at least one whose speech was the same as her own. Already the sun was casting long shadows and with a sinking heart Rachel proceeded on her way, never seeing a soldier who followed her cautiously and at a safe distance. He also watched the sun. At last he approached near enough to hear her question, put now not so much with timidity as with desperation. He addressed her in her own tongue: "I know the man thou seekest. Thou hast but to come with me."

Although his pronunciation was distinctly bad, she turned with pleasure at the words, but at sight of the speaker she shrank back, shivering.

"Thoughtest thou to escape?" He was regarding her with a kind of cruel exultation. "I have found thee again as I swore I would, and now—"

His hand rested compellingly upon her shoulder. The girl pleaded tremulously: "Is it not enough that thou shouldst have taken me captive in Israel? Yet did the God of my fathers preserve me then and later on the road hither. I shall believe that here in Damascus I shall fare no worse. Thy name, I know, is Lemuel, and there must be some law, some protection for the innocent—"

Despite the bravery of the words her voice faltered. She was weary and heartsick. Had she endured so much only to fall into danger at every step? Her captor had drawn her within an alleyway and in the fast gathering dusk the hurrying

pedestrians neither saw nor heard aught amiss. He spoke in a tone of easy confidence, secure in possession, but Rachel heeded not. She was planning escape, yet weighed down by a sense of her own helplessness. With a grip on her arm which made her wince with pain, she felt herself hurried along to an unknown destination.

Emerging upon a less frequented thoroughfare, they unexpectedly encountered two men on horseback, riding slowly and straining their eyes into the night as if in search of something or somebody. The man at Rachel's side glanced carelessly; again more intently and with a muttered exclamation partially relaxed his hold. That instant's indecision lost him his prey. With a strength at which she wondered Rachel tore herself out of his grasp and fled, whither she knew not. A few moments had sufficed to change her into a fugitive, afraid of people, afraid of the torches which the few travelers still abroad were compelled to carry. She sought only some dark corner in which to stand panting and then, afraid lest even its kindly shelter be sinister, to hurry to another.

It was in the intense darkness and stillness which precedes the dawn that the girl, utterly exhausted, crouched in the shadow thrown by a large dwelling and fell into a deep sleep. When the world turned gray two men on horseback extinguished their torches and approached the entrance to this abode.

The face of one was ashy with fatigue and disappointment. Observing the huddled figure he bent over it and uttered a joyful exclamation, beckoning for the other.

"Our search is ended. While we roamed abroad by night, she whom we sought found her way alone to protection. Quickly, bring food and water and borrow a cloak from one of the maid servants, while I remain here to guard the maiden."

The voices awakened the sleeper. Startled and confused, Rachel found herself gazing into the face of the very young captain who had commanded the little company of soldiers under whose escort she had been brought from Israel. She recalled to mind the respect with which he had seen to it she was treated; his courtesy the day he had discovered her hiding place, yet fear made her suspicious. She would have fled once more, but before she could rise she noticed the compassion in his look, the deference in his manner. His reassuring words were spoken in her own tongue and as though it were native to him.

The incident at the gate, he said, and Rachel recalled her experience with a shudder, had attracted the attention of his servant, who had brought him word. Together they had sought her through the streets of the city throughout the night, hoping to aid her, to give her a better impression of Damascus than she had evidently formed. As they had re-

turned, almost persuaded that she must have found friends with whom she was sheltered, they had discovered her asleep, at the portal of the House of Naaman, of whom she had doubtless heard and who was as good as he was great. The servant had now gone for some refreshment. When she had partaken and her strength was somewhat restored, she would permit him, he hoped, to assist her to make plans for the future.

All at once the nerve-tension relaxed and Rachel found herself strangely weak and trembling. She answered with puzzled relief: "Thou dost not look altogether like my people, but thou speakest as one. Canst thou direct me to the House of Ezekiel, in the street of the merchants of Israel? He is my kinsman."

The anxious expression left the young man's face. "Yea," he said, "as soon as thou hast eaten and drunken—and here cometh my servant—thou wilt find that I am the way. Behold, I go before thee. Follow thou me."

An hour later Rachel, guided by the soldier, arrived at the street and the dwelling she had so greatly desired to find, but disappointment awaited her. "Ezekiel? Yea, he *was* here," she was told, "but a month ago he died and only yesterday his family started back to Israel."

Rachel was not Isaac's only problem. There was

Miriam. That she was related to the shepherd who had nursed him with tender care through a long illness meant, to the young man, that he should see to her welfare; that the gift he had brought his master's wife from the enemy's country should be unappreciated, that the child was unwanted and unwelcome, stirred him to profound indignation; and that she grieved for the home and loved ones from which he had ruthlessly taken her roused his deepest pity.

In compensation he gave her the best of himself—his leisure moments, his most unselfish thought. All at once he became critical of his own motives and those of others. Miriam had such an uncomfortable way of looking him straight in the eye and innocently inquiring, "Thinkest thou Jehovah would be pleased?" He had never thought before nor cared. "Jehovah" was a name his mother revered and to which his sister was not indifferent, but it had meant nothing in particular to him. Now, however, with the obligation of answering the frank questions of this small maiden, who seemed to believe him the embodiment of wisdom, he began to observe and compare conduct, to ask himself what was worth while and why. As the weeks and months went by, such considerations could not fail to react upon his own ideals nor remain unnoticed by others.

In his wife's apartments lingered Naaman, soldier-statesman of Syria. "What thinkest thou,

Adah, of the little maid who is of the Land of Israel?"

His wife toyed with a silken tassel. "I know not indeed, having seen her but a time or two and that from a distance."

"Then thou dost not care for the present Isaac brought thee, with such elation, from afar?" Something there was in the cool displeasure of the tone which caused the lady suddenly to remember that Isaac's parents had served her husband's family; that Isaac's mother had been Naaman's nurse; and that Isaac himself had been born in that very house.

She hastened to her own defense. "The maid of whom thou speakest hath been so woe-begone I felt I owed it to myself not to be troubled by her sadness. Milcah hath borne tidings of her and I was not attracted."

His reply was dictated by long observation and much worldly knowledge. "Milcah taketh precautions lest she be supplanted later. Fear hath eyes of its own and its vision is oft distorted. Thou wilt be wise, I think, to judge of the little maid for thyself. It hath been my experience that where there is a drop of Israelitish blood, there is trustworthiness. Oft have I wondered if their religion had aught to do with it. Look thou at Isaac. Because he understandeth the tongue of Israel, I sent him with Lemuel, kinsman of thy friend, to spy out the

land to the south of us. Of the two, Isaac brought back the more detailed and reliable information."

Adah was glad to turn the conversation into this new channel. "Was it for this thou didst reward him with the captaincy of a small band? My friends were somewhat displeased, hoping no doubt for such preferment for Lemuel."

The man frowned. "Should I not reward justly? Isaac is young, thou sayest? Ah, but age is not a matter of birthdays. He joyeth in responsibility." The speaker smiled. "Hast thou not observed his care over the little maid?"

Later and alone, Adah, wife of Naaman, sat wrapped in reflection. It were undoubtedly right and politic to please one's husband. His judgment concerning the little maid should be respected. He was impulsive but astute. Of course, when properly trained, even a tiny maid would be useful, but oh, the tediousness, the annoyance of the training! She would be awkward and heedless. Nay, for the present at least it would be best to wait.

CHAPTER VIII

DOUBTS

ALMOST six months passed. In the House of Amos, friend of that Ezekiel who had died, sat Rachel, the scalding tears dropping from between her fingers. She was not unmindful that Rebekah, wife of Amos, was holding a guarded conversation out in the courtyard with her bosom friend and that it concerned her.

"I think her trouble hath affected her mind," the neighbor was saying. "When thou wert gone to the Street of the Bakers I peeped in at the door and she was laughing and crying over a bracelet made of dried grasses which was hung around her neck. She would have hidden it when I appeared, but when I insisted upon knowing its history she said it had been given her by the young shepherd to whom she is betrothed. They were children then and played at a wedding and she kept the foolish token. It is the nearest she will ever come to a marriage, poor child, and I told her so."

Rebekah nodded.

"Thou knowest," the other woman continued, "that the soldier who brought her hither cometh not at all since the first day or two, when he came to

inquire how she fared. Then he did not ask to see her, nor even when he brought thee the gold wherewith to purchase her new clothing. Didst thou not think it strange that he wished her to think the gift came from Amos and thee? To my mind it is plain that he desireth to be rid of the maiden. Peradventure he is relieved to place the responsibility with thee."

Under this positive indictment Rebekah's double chin quivered. "All we know of her," she agreed, "is that some six months ago she came somewhat after dawn, which hath seemed very odd to me, with a young soldier, evidently an officer, seeking Ezekiel, and that Amos, in pity for her distress, took her into our home until we could find out something about her. Yet, beyond the tale she telleth, we know no more than at first. Gentle she is and sweet and if what she saith be true—"

Rebekah's friend regarded her severely. "The minute I saw her with the soldier I knew that no good would come of it. Thou didst say the same and her story goeth but to prove—"

The voices sunk lower. Rachel could catch the import but not the words. However, she had heard enough. They doubted her account of herself and she had no way whereby to prove it. She might, of course, make an attempt to find the soldier who had been so kind. His name was "Isaac" and he had spoken of the great House of Naaman as "home,"

but she hesitated to throw herself upon the mercy of any man. The bitterness of being allowed a shelter on a sufferance which might terminate at any time! Where was she to go? What to do? And not for herself alone was she anxious. What had become of Nathan? How fared it with poor little Miriam?

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In the meanwhile Miriam, formerly of the Land of Israel, now of the Land of Syria but always, at least in her happier moments, a dweller in the Land of Make-Believe, where you and I once lived, had discovered something new. By piling the cushions high on that wide bench which ran around three sides of the room, and standing upon them, she could look through the window-opening out upon the street. The lattice, which kept out the bats so nicely, would also prevent anyone on the outside from seeing the face at the window.

There was so much to be seen close at hand! From the roof, the figures on the streets of Damascus looked almost as small as had the ants crawling about their hills in Israel. Why, there was Isaac coming and he had a timbrel under his arm! She was sure it was for her because she had mentioned, one day, how much better she could sing the Lord's songs when accompanied by music, and they had talked about timbrels. She knew just how he would give it to her. He would make an elabo-

rate bow and say: "Fair lady, accept, I pray thee, a fond token of remembrance from thy faithful subjects beyond the Great Sea who have sent this, through many and great dangers, by the hand of thy devoted slave."

She would take it with very grand airs, just as if she were a fair lady with subjects beyond the Great Sea and it had been sent through many dangers, when they both knew that he had bought it for her in that very city in one of those puzzling little shops he had told her about and which he was going to take her to see some time. She wondered if it would be the day he would also take her to see Rachel, who was so happy in the home of Ezekiel's friend in the street of the merchants of Israel.

Next she would become extremely grave and tell him that just before he came into the courtyard somebody had thrown him a kiss. She knew it for a fact, but he would never guess who it was. At first he would not believe such a thing, then he would reluctantly admit that she might have seen a kiss thrown, but it was surely meant for someone else—Milcah, perhaps. This being denied, he would accept her word for it, but be very much mystified and make so many wild and improbable guesses as to the source from which it came that it was a great deal of fun. At last he would give it up and she would have to tell him that it was herself. At this he would assume a comical expression of relief and

say that such being the case he was not so distressed because, not having any little sister of his own, he had adopted her, but if it had been anyone else—here his tone would become tragic—he would be most uncomfortable, for, as she knew, he was so bashful. At this they would both laugh, for he was not bashful at all, and their play would be over.

They would then sit on the marble bench under the damson tree in the courtyard, where they could see the fountain and hear the birds, and he would give her a lesson. Every day he taught her a few words of Syrian and encouraged her to tell him all her experiences since the day before in that language so that she would the sooner become proficient. Thus she began to “save up” things to relate and to “pick up” words as she wandered among the maid servants. He had begun this task as a dreaded duty. He continued it as a pleasure, finding her intelligent and quick and her ideas frequently original.

Miriam neither guessed his one-time aversion to these lessons nor his present satisfaction. He was learning tact as well as patience. She only knew that he was sufficiently young to grasp her viewpoint just as Eli had once done—that Eli about whom she was so voluble. “Because Benjamin had Rachel to talk to,” she explained, “and I am going to marry Eli when I grow up.” He wondered why he felt complimented that she should tell him this “secret,”

but he did. In response he gravely approved her choice, and even asked the privilege of being the friend of the bridegroom, who would, according to Eastern usage, make the necessary arrangements! The lesson over he would say good-by until the next day, and when he had gone she always found that the sun did not seem to shine so brightly.

She was still gazing through the lattice when she was suddenly jerked down, and a voice she had learned to fear said, indignantly, "I know the man to whom thou art throwing kisses."

Miriam fingered her arm ruefully. To get those bruises over that! She answered a little triumphantly: "Nay, Milcah, it was no man at all. It was only Isaac."

There was a sound from the veranda wonderfully like a stifled laugh, but it passed unnoticed in the excitement. Milcah's tones were coldly severe: "In justice I shall have to say that I can find no fault with thy general conduct, but I have observed that thou art very bold toward my brother. Shame on thee!"

Miriam was stunned. Bold! Why, to be that was to be the worst thing on earth, for a bold maiden was never respected. Her mother had told her. After a long minute she found voice: "Thinkest thou I do not know that 'men' are strangers or those who have no right to caress thee? Thinkest thou my mother hath not warned me to be careful? Isaac

is not a man. He is just—just—Isaac. The same as Benjamin. I almost hated him at first because he took me from my home”—the words came chokingly—“but he hath explained to me that he cannot take me back, yet he repenteth of the evil he hath done and seeketh to make me happy. *Thou* hast never been kind—nor anyone else in this big house save Isaac—”

She could say no more, but with heart almost bursting under its load of grief and misunderstanding, she ran swiftly past Isaac without seeing him and hid somewhere to weep for the mother she never expected to see again. Milcah was limp with despair when her brother entered the room.

“At her age *I* never attracted a man’s attention.”

“Nor at any age, sister.”

The woman glanced at him quickly and beheld what she had never thought to see in his face—a wrath so great that she cowered before it. His tones were new and strange: “Oft hast thou told me, sister, of our great leader, Moses, who met Jehovah face to face in the flaming bush of the desert. I go to the desert but to fight its wandering hordes of warriors. Hast thou considered where *I* am to meet Jehovah? Might it not be in the pure heart of this little maid? Certainly I have done nothing to deserve her gratitude and affection, and thou as little; but if I were worthy, I think there is naught that could hold a man to higher thoughts and better

deeds than the trust and expectancy in the eyes of a child."

The speaker departed hurriedly. He too could say no more, for quite suddenly his own shortcomings swarmed before him like black specters with murderous intent. Why had he not told Miriam of her brother's captivity? Why had he not taken her to see Rachel? Why had he failed to tell the older maiden of the presence in Syria of her betrothed? Why had he not sought out Benjamin, as he had long ago promised? Was it enough that he had assured himself of his benefactor's safety? Nay, he lacked courage. That was it: he was afraid, he, a soldier! He was afraid to lose the flattering confidence of the little maid; afraid to expose himself to the fascination Rachel still held for him; afraid to confess the injury he had unwittingly wrought Benjamin, the man to whom he was indebted. The thought was bitter: he—afraid. Yet it was true. He would begin reparation by telling Miriam of Benjamin; by taking her this very day to see Rachel; but she was nowhere to be found and he went away regretful. On the morrow, if he could obtain permission, he would be far away. *If* he could obtain permission! Did he not come and go at another's will? The morrow might bring duties elsewhere.

Milcah, when Isaac had gone, sat down weakly upon the bench which had been the scene of Miriam's transgression. She was face to face with a stupen-

dous thought. Her young brother was growing into manhood. He formed his own opinions and defended them. She had lost her baby! She said the words over slowly, trying to comprehend; trying to tear loose her heartstrings; trying to imagine him as he would be in the future. She was dazed, bewildered, sorrowful. That he should have rebelled against words spoken for his own good; should have defied her, to whom he was so dear! The outburst had been so unnecessary, and then her anger flamed against Miriam. Had it not been for *her* it would never have happened. Always was there a maid, large or small, to come between a man and his family. Had she not seen it? It was the way of the world. The only thing that saved the present situation was that this was a little maid. How careful she would have to be never to offend one whom he loved!

Meditating irritably, she was annoyed to find a small figure in her lap, a wet cheek pressed to hers: "I am sorry, Milcah, that I said thou wert not kind. I should have remembered thou wert not brought up in Israel, and so thou dost not know about 'showing forth his loving-kindness in the morning and his faithfulness every night,' but be of good comfort, I will show thee how."

The woman gasped. "I need not," she commenced indignantly, and broke off the sentence in the middle, glaring in displeasure but utter helpless-

ness into the tear-stained face of this unwelcome child who was taking such unwarranted liberties. No one else would dare! Yet it was distinctly pleasant to feel those clinging little arms. It roused one to such unexpectedly human emotions. She wondered how it would have been if her mother had not frowned upon Somebody. If the brief romance, so quickly stifled, had come true, if she had married, would a little maid of her very own be making charming overtures of affection like this one?

All at once Milcah gathered the child to her bosom, a little awed at the overpowering sweetness of it but wholly lost in its joy. Without premeditation she was whispering soft words which had never been used since Isaac had needed them; words which came falteringly from a tongue to which they were new and strange; words she had thought never to speak again. A long time they sat thus while a maid servant peeped in at the door and, amazed at what she saw, went away stealthily to tell the tale to those who scoffed at it as impossible.

Thus did Miriam end her Quest of the Hidden Heart, the same having been found.

CHAPTER IX

INTRODUCTIONS

It was a week later that Milcah's voice interrupted Miriam's slumbers: "Arise quickly and prepare thyself. This day thou goest with me to the shop of Amos, the perfumer."

A pair of bright eyes flew open, a cheerful voice answered, and an agile little body was soon robing itself.

"Nay, not that garment, Miriam, but this which I have had woven for thee, and sandals for street-wear and this padded cloak. The morning is cool."

The recipient of these unusual attentions gazed with delight, touching the gifts with admiration and wonder. "'Tis so white, Milcah, the robe, I mean, and it hath such a beautiful border of colored threads. I like it better than fringe and I never had so fine a cloak before nor such expensive sandals. They are like a pair sent to Rachel from this very city by her kinsman, Ezekiel."

It had been a very different week from any Miriam had passed before. Milcah's awkward motherliness had been all the more welcome since Isaac had been away on business for his master. She had seen him for but a brief and serious moment.

"When I return," he had told her, "I must tell

thee something thou shouldst have known before. Also, thou shalt see Rachel, but to-day there is not time enough," and he was gone.

The speech had led to much speculation as to what that "something" might be, but then she was puzzled by quite a number of things in the new life. For instance, it was not a joyous household. No one was ever merry, and if any inadvertently laughed aloud, he or she immediately assumed an apologetic attitude which seemed strange when coupled with the evident prosperity of the House of Naaman. Also, though of lesser importance, there was one door in the Women's Courtyard which never remained open and through which none passed save Milcah and, less often, Isaac. Miriam had never asked questions. To her, the Closed Door was an accepted but mystifying fact just as was the Joyless Household; just as had been the Lady of the Hidden Heart by whose side she was now crossing the courtyard.

At a point just outside the gate they met Isaac, who greeted them hurriedly. He had returned but an hour ago, he said, and was even now setting off on another errand on which he would be gone a few days. This being not unusual and Milcah likewise disposed to hasten, they went their separate ways, but Miriam was distinctly disappointed. He had not noticed the new garments of which she was so happily conscious; he had not in-

quired where she went on this, the first occasion she had left the House of Naaman since she had entered it; he had scarcely seemed to see her at all.

Wondering much, she walked very soberly by Milcah's side, but the marvelous experiences of the next two hours crowded unpleasant remembrances from her mind. For the first time she viewed close at hand the streets and bazaars of Damascus; those crowded streets at which she had once been affrighted; which she had so often observed from the roof; which seemed mysteriously shorn of terror now; those small, stall-like bazaars Isaac had described, crowded with every conceivable merchandise, salable articles hung on the walls and piled on the ground, the merchants sitting cross-legged in the center of their wares. It was all so bewilderingly different from Hannathon, the only "city" she had ever seen save Damascus!

The stern lines of Milcah's mouth relaxed into a little smile as she answered eager, excited questions and looked into the flushed face of her companion. "The child taketh dress," she thought to herself. "She is not so unattractive as at first and she commenteth with intelligence upon what she sees. Peradventure she may become useful to me. Her nimble feet may oft save mine own from weariness. At once will I begin—"

But Milcah's thoughts received an unexpected check. She stopped short, amazed and displeased,

for there, on the footway of the busy street, in front of the shop of Amos the perfumer, stood Isaac, talking low and earnestly with a maiden whose full face was not visible from where they stood. The two saw only each other, paying no attention whatever to the jostling throngs which surged past them.

Milcah drew Miriam a little aside: "So this was the meaning of his haste! Deaf is he and blind to his only sister, and when he is married he will have time for neither thee nor me." She was greatly agitated, and her impressive tones carried an unaccountable chill to the heart of her listener. She had lost her friend! That was why he had not seemed to see her that morning. It would always be that way. Miriam brushed away a tear as the two parted with lingering adieux.

For the first time they saw the face of the girl at whom he was still smiling, and Milcah was not relieved to note that she was of undoubted beauty. Evidently, too, she was of Israelitish blood, which made the situation all the more hopeless. It would be easier to urge objections against one of another race. With determination she turned to Miriam.

"The maiden went into the House of Amos. With him have I business regarding perfumes for my mistress and with his wife have I some acquaintance, so that I may, with no impropriety, inquire the meaning of what we have witnessed. I would know how long this hath continued and something

of the maid herself. Before I am obliged to accept her as a sister I desire to learn—”

But Milcah was speaking to empty air. Miriam had already disappeared within the doorway and when the woman arrived and had exchanged with the inmates of the dwelling the elaborate courtesies of the East, she found the child and the strange maiden wholly engrossed in a happy conversation. The older girl at last became aware of voices near and questioning, annoyed glances. She looked up with a face transfigured with joy.

“Two beautiful surprises hath come to me to-day: this little maid and before that Isaac came—”

Rachel paused, perceiving the sudden coolness with which her words were received, but lifting her head a trifle defiantly she concluded the sentence almost with triumph: “And within the month I am to be publicly betrothed.”

“I suppose,” commented Milcah, “that thou art counting the days.”

The girl looked her steadily in the eye: “I never wanted anything in my life so much as I want a home in which I may hide from the cruelties I have suffered since I was taken captive.” She brushed away a tear. “Yet I would not be ungrateful for all the mercies vouchsafed unto me by the God of my fathers, nor would I be so unjust to my betrothed as to marry him if I did not love him much, much more than my own ease or comfort.”

A blush overspread her cheek and she smiled down at Miriam, whom she was holding in a close embrace.

"Then thou art very sure thou lovest him and wilt make him a worthy wife; that thou art not taking advantage of his goodness of heart nor considering thyself first of all." Milcah's tone was judicial, almost accusing.

Rachel answered slowly, wonderingly: "I know not why thou shouldst ask, but since our vows are soon to be said before the world there is no reason why I should not tell thee how I love him, have always loved him—as he loveth me."

Milcah's heart sank. Here was confirmation of her worst fears. She loved him too. She did not wish him to marry this maiden, nor any other, but if his heart were set in this direction, she would not want him disappointed. She would try to approve his choice; try to forget her own loneliness when he should be absorbed in someone else and forget her, as was natural, as all men did forget their families when once they were married.

A little hand was laid against her arm, a little voice with compassion in it was urging her to listen. In the light of what had gone before, Miriam had understood Milcah's remarks as Rachel could not; had comprehended Milcah's thoughts from the despair on her countenance, and now came to the rescue of both. With a thrill of being at last needed she

realized that she held the key to an embarrassing situation. How much more she knew of the whole matter than anyone else present! She could guess why Isaac had come. Had he not promised to take care of Rachel for Benjamin, to whom he was indebted? Into an atmosphere thick with misunderstanding, Miriam volubly poured her explanations.

And now, she concluded, Isaac had gone to bring Benjamin, to whom Rachel was betrothed, lacking only the public acknowledgment. Not until Rachel told her did Miriam know he was also in Syria, a captive with his flock, Isaac having spared to tell her lest she grieve for the desolation of her parents. Her voice choked. But now that Rachel had no home (Rebekah winced), she was glad he was near.

"Thinkest thou he will come?" asked Rebekah's friend, sharply. "Will he not resent the—the—interest of the soldier?"

Rachel answered with a trace of indignation. "He will be grateful to the soldier, for much kindness hath Isaac showed me and asked naught in return."

Milcah, likewise indignant at the slur, found herself liking Rachel immensely. In this maiden's hands her brother's reputation was quite safe.

Miriam assured them that he *would* come and that without delay, and went on to add numberless details which bore the manifest stamp of truth, even to the mention of the sandals she was wearing,

which were so very like a pair Ezekiel had once sent Rachel.

Long after farewells had been said and the visitors had departed, Rachel caressed the grass-woven bracelet strung from a chain around her neck, oblivious to comments, unheeding the low-toned conference between Rebekah and her friend.

"The minute I saw her with him," Rebekah was saying, "never did I doubt either of them nor the tale they told."

"Never," agreed her friend, "and she with looks and ways so like Ezekiel, as we have often said."

"Well do I remember," continued Rebekah, "the gifts he sent to Israel and with what praise he spoke of this young kinswoman! The child, Miriam, recalleth it to my mind. A lovable little maid! Ah me, how fast they grow! To think I should not have known Isaac, a man now and an officer, when as a lad his sister hath oft brought him to the shop!"

"If only the maiden were betrothed to the soldier!" sighed the friend, "but to a wandering shepherd!"

"Yea," Rebekah answered, sorrowfully, "and a sad day will it be for Amos and me when we shall have to lose our sweet little Rachel!"

That visit changed Miriam's whole attitude toward her new life. Although her longing for her parents and the old familiar faces and places re-

mained almost overpowering at times, yet in Rachel's presence and Benjamin's nearness she discovered comforting home ties. The certainty that her brother would soon be in Damascus and that she was free to visit her friend, did much to bring contentment. A captive she might be, but not a prisoner. The color began to come back to the pale cheeks; she grew more cheerful and energetic, more diligent in seeking ways of usefulness, and that is how it happened that she had an adventure while Isaac was gone. She walked straight through the Closed Door and stepped—not on but still further into—Milcah's heart.

It was Memory that opened the door and Kindness which escorted her over the threshold, and it all came about through her new timbrel. She was singing in the courtyard and inadvertently paused near the Closed Door.

“Show me thy ways, O Lord;
Teach me thy paths.
Guide me in thy truth and teach me;
For thou art the God of my salvation;
For thee do I wait all the day.”

Looking up, she was startled to find Milcah at hand with a hesitant invitation.

“I never told thee before and asked Isaac not to let thee know that our mother is living, lest thou annoy her. She is old and bedridden, and I thought

she would not enjoy having a child around, but to-day she hath heard thee singing the Lord's songs in which she rejoiceth and hath asked that thou shouldst be brought to her. Dost thou wish to go? She is a native of Israel."

"Take me quickly, Milcah. I would be so very glad to sing to her," and though the woman looked incredulous, she did not delay.

Behind the Closed Door was a sight that ordinarily would not appeal to youth, for age is not beautiful in the East. Wrinkled, bald, toothless and feeble, it excited compassion in the heart of the little visitor. She went to the bed and spoke kindly, stooping to peer into the weak eyes and to pat the worn hand. Then, at a command, she picked up her timbrel and sang again:

"Blessed be the Lord,
Because he hath heard the voice of my supplications.
The Lord is my strength and my shield,
In him hath my heart trusted,
And I am helped;
Therefore my heart greatly rejoiceth,
And with my song will I praise him."

That was only the beginning: the beginning of that particular visit and of others which followed, and in between the songs were snatches of conversation in the speech of Israel. In her youth the invalid had been a resident of Tish-bi (or Tish-beh) in

Gilead, the cattle country east of the Jordan, in whose fertile valleys grew the spicy herbs for medicine and perfume which had made her land famous all over the East.

In her village were the home and kinsfolk of Elijah, the prophet of Jehovah, whom she well remembered with his long, thick hair, his girdle of skins and his sheepskin mantle or cloak, and more than one tale did she tell of his prowess in strength, for, exposed to the raids of the fierce desert tribes as was Gilead on the east, every man must be a soldier at need. She told of the prophet's earnestness and eloquence, his stormy moods of exaltation and despair, his wanderings, his sudden reappearances where least expected, his invectives against Baal by which he had roused the ire of the foreign Queen Jezebel, his miraculous escapes from personal danger and the staggering blow he finally gave Baal-worship on Mount Carmel.

Only through Miriam's eyes, however, did she know Elijah's successor, Elisha the Healer, the civilized man who dwelt in cities, who for the most part went about displaying the loving-kindness of Jehovah rather than his terrible might; whose task it was to build up as Elijah's had been to destroy; who established the prophetic Guilds wherein the Law which had been so long forgotten was once more taught. And then Miriam and her new friend fell into more personal confidences, comparing notes

as to their coming to Syria, their impressions, their longings, weeping and smiling together and parting only to visit again at the earliest opportunity.

Thus did Hope, nature's most renowned and successful physician, undertake the cure of the little maid's wounded heart as, far away, it was doing likewise for her mother, though Miriam knew it not.

CHAPTER X

HANNATHON

THE village or "city" of Hannathon in the Land of Israel saw startling changes as a result of the Syrian raid. Gone were the flocks and herds; gone were the stores of oil and wine; gone was the lately garnered grain, and they who had journeyed to Jerusalem to the feast returned to scant supplies. It was Eli who waited for them at the foot of the hill and broke the news to the little companies as they arrived, but Caleb, father of Miriam, came not.

"He tarrieth a day or two behind us," said his friends, and Eli waited impatiently one day and a second and yet a third after the last of his townsmen had straggled up the hill. Then it was Sarah, and not Caleb, who met his view, riding dejectedly her faithful and weary beast and leading the other, on the back of which was bound something still and covered.

As Caleb had traveled, making what haste he could in pleasant anticipation of home and family, he had been set upon by thieves. He had not risen from the narrow, rocky road in which he had fallen from the blows of the robber band, but the timely arrival of other pilgrims had doubtless saved her from the same fate. They had dragged his body

into a convenient cave while they tried frantically to restore breathing, but finding it quite useless they had bound the burden to the back of his patient ass and accompanied her to within sight of Hannathon.

In the pitiful horror of her tale Eli felt that his own was matched. If he could only spare her! But he could not, and told her as tenderly as possible. She listened numbly, without exclamation, without tears. It was as if brain and nerves had already borne more than they could take cognizance of. After a time he helped her up the hill, where Judith was waiting; waiting in dread of the displeasure she knew she merited, yet keyed up to defiance. There was, however, no harsh rebuke. In fact, Sarah seemed scarcely to recognize her as she leaned heavily upon Eli. Hastily Judith unrolled the thickly padded rug or quilt which served as a bed and the two laid her upon it. Without a word she turned her face to the wall and Eli beckoned the girl to the door, where he whispered the sad news concerning Caleb.

Later in the day a crowd of white-faced men and women laid the body reverently away and sealed the rocky tomb with a heavy stone. Sarah, on her bed, appeared unconscious of all that passed, and Judith would not leave her. After doing a hundred things which occurred to her as necessary for the bodily comfort of her kinswoman, the girl patiently watched the long night through, the one witness to

Sarah's dumb agony. Eli was, of course, with his mother. A neighbor, coming to offer her services, had said that Hannah might not live.

Mad fancies took possession of Judith that awful night. She had the feeling that every hour was a year and that, by morning, she would be an old, old woman. Again, she was a mother, brooding over a sick babe, and she stroked the head on the mattress and murmured soothing words. At other times she had a wild desire to shriek, to tear her hair, to stamp and rave, but in the presence of that awful stillness came peace. In the gray of the morning she opened the heavy front door and let in a stream of sweet, cool air. As she stood there her mind cleared.

There was something tangible about that long street with its flat-roofed houses, seen dimly through the mist; there was something tangible about that silvery rim rising higher and higher in the east and gradually dissipating the shadows; there was something tangible in the chill wind that swept over and around her. In a little while she would go for fuel. They would enjoy the warmth of a fire even if there was little to eat. As she turned back into the house Sarah broke her long silence. She was holding something in her hand and peering at it.

"Neither husband nor son," she was saying in a voice very unlike her own, "but this—*this*—which can avail nothing; this for which hath been spent the earnings of years; this for which Caleb was

slain and which was yet not found because I had hidden it; this which hath no power to avenge my daughter or to bring me back my loved ones or to do aught but torment with its impotency."

Raising up on her elbow, she threw out of the door whatever it was she held in her hand, and lay back exhausted. After a moment she went on in that strangely rambling tone: "Neither husband nor son to avenge the captivity of my daughter; to—"

A tall form stood in the doorway. It was Eli. At the words he came forward and bent over the figure on the pallet, his hot tears dropping on her face.

"The son who is without a mother shall care for the mother who is without a son. An hour ago my mother fell victim to the soldier's sword." He clinched his hands and drew a long, sobbing breath. "I will avenge thy daughter and my brother and my mother. For one thing only will I live henceforth: to follow into Syria those who are gone; to find them and to secure their ransom. Their sorrows shall be mine; their weeping shall be even as mine own, and woe unto him by whom they were taken!"

The woman seemed strangely excited. She rose unsteadily and tottered to the door. "I threw away that which would help thee to accomplish thy vow. It was a pearl, a pearl of great price which we brought from Jerusalem, meaning to give it to Miriam when she is older."

Attempting to cross the threshold she fell, overborne by lack of nourishment, weariness and grief. Eli raised her with his one good arm and he and Judith again laid her on the bed. He lingered, speaking comforting words the while: "When it is fully light we will look for thy pearl. Fear not, it shall be found. Judith and I will seek—" but Judith was slipping hastily away.

"I go for firewood," she explained, and partially closed the door behind her. Once outside and assured that Eli still sat beside her aunt, she sank to her knees and groped upon the ground. Handfuls of earth, sticks and stones, thorns and stinging ants rewarded her search, but she cared not. The sun rose higher and she lifted her head in smiling thankfulness. At last she rose, rejoicing, clutching something in her hand, hugging it to her bosom.

She was about to re-enter the house when, far below her, she espied the familiar figure of a man. In demonstrative Eastern fashion he was beating his breast and pouring dust upon his head, customs indicative of overwhelming sorrow. The girl suddenly changed her mind and went down the hill, passing the man but paying no attention to him. Half an hour later he passed her where she was industriously and demurely gathering brush. In the common calamity Eastern etiquette might well be disregarded. He stopped to speak to her as though she had been a man and an equal.

"Woe is me," he began. "Gone are my flocks and herds; gone are my stores of wine and olives; gone is my newly garnered grain; naught remaineth but the bare fields wherewith to mock me while famine and sickness and death stare our village in the face."

"Not to mock thee, my lord," she replied, her voice low from nervousness and the fear of being overheard by some unsuspected passer-by, "not to mock thee do thy fields stare thee in the face, but to save us from the disasters thou dost mention."

His tones held surprise and a certain amount of incredulity. "A prudent mind is thine, but long will it be until next harvest, and how shall we live until then?" He regarded her shrewdly while she made answer.

"In our house is a little food; in Hannah's a little more; probably some remaineth in every dwelling. Do thou go quickly, my lord, gather up whatever there be and put it in thy storehouse. Then it shall be that day by day the people shall come unto thee for food and thou shalt apportion it, so-much and so-much for each person. Thus shall the gluttonous divide with him that hath little and so shall all be fed. Fear not, thou shalt plant and reap in due time. Hasten, my lord, the village waiteth upon thee."

In his eyes was frank admiration. "Wise are thy words and quickly will I do as thou sayest, but how thinkest thou I can plant without seed and reap with nothing wherewith to sow?"

Judith's hand opened and trembling a little she held before his dazzled eyes the pearl she had just found: "A jewel, my lord, given unto me by my father and kept hidden until now. Do thou take it and go unto other cities and buy seed. So shalt thou and I and the village be saved from death and thy prosperity come again. Only, I pray thee, tell no one whence came the pearl."

She paused, a world of entreaty in her manner. He assented, his hand clutching the jewel, but his eyes fastened upon her.

"Most discreet art thou of all the women of Israel and long hath my soul cleaved unto thee. I will do as thou sayest, and when I return it shall be, if thou thinkest well, that I shall ask for thee at the hands of thy kinswoman, Sarah, and thou shalt be my wife."

Judith stooped without haste and picked up her bundle of brush. "Yea, my lord," she murmured, preparing to leave him and dropping her eyelids to hide an exultant gleam, "thy servant shall be obedient unto thy wishes in the matter."

Halfway up the hill she paused and looked back. He was diligently examining the pearl. Her lip curled slightly.

"Thy *soul* cleaveth unto me, thou sayest? Nay, for hereabouts they say thou hast none." She laughed to herself. "When a faithless Israelite taketh unto himself a wife who is a 'heathen' they who

know us will say that no worse fate could come to either. And when the two who are most despised form an alliance, each should know that there is no friend save in the other."

The sun had risen fully when Judith returned to the house. Eli, groping unavailingly upon the ground, drew her aside for a whispered word. "No pearl can I find and she had not strength to throw it far. Thinkest thou she had the jewel but in a dream? Thinkest thou that sorrow hath affected her mind?"

The girl drew a breath of relief and letting fall the brush pretended to assist him in the search. "Yea," she assented with apparent reluctance, "surely it is as thou sayest, and she but dreamed. As if she would cast away a valuable pearl! Nay, but thou hast spoken the truth," and sighing heavily she passed into the house.

Adah, wife of Naaman, was slightly indisposed. Restlessly she tossed on her silken pillow, wooing in vain the sleep which came fitfully and with disturbing dreams. Her attendant had departed on some errand when through the open door there stole a small shadow. Softly it moved about the room for a few moments, touching this and changing that, then it came and stood over the fair form of the mistress of this magnificent home. It stooped, straightened up as if considering, then bent hastily

and kissed gently each eyelid. The eyes flew open in bewilderment and at the same moment a delighted little voice exclaimed:

"I knew it would. It never faileth. I have been looking at thee for a long time through the open door and thou wert so restless I thought it better to wake thee up entirely while I give thee a fresh, cool pillow," suiting the action to the word, "then will I kiss each eyelid again and thou wilt go straight to sleep. Dost thou notice how I have propped these other pillows to shut out the light, and drawn the curtains so they will sway with the breeze and make thee think thou art breathing the sweet air of the courtyard? There, I have smoothed thy robes and thou wilt be much more comfortable. Now, a kiss here—and one on this eye—nay, open them not; thou must not get too wide awake, for I have not time to sing thee to sleep to-day. There—sh—sh!"

The object of these unexpected attentions drew a satisfied sigh. It was pleasant to be put so entirely at ease without having to think about it at all. The others fussed so and it grew monotonous to be giving directions continually. She had never been taken possession of in just this way before. Everybody else—even Milcah—was so irritatingly anxious to be dignified and proper. There was nothing disrespectful in these quiet tones. It merely showed sense. A moment later there floated through her drowsy consciousness the startling intelligence that this must

be the little maid of Israel whom she had so dreaded until "trained." Taking care not to open the eyes so surprisingly closed, the lady murmured a command to stay right there lest she should want something farther.

"I should like to," Miriam answered serenely, "but thou hast everything thou wilt need for quite awhile because thou wilt be asleep. I have to take my timbrel now and sing to Milcah's mother. She is much, much older than thou and needeth me much, much more, but I will come again to see thee when I can spare the time," with which cheerful assurance Miriam betook herself off with the gladness of being at last wanted.

Her newest acquaintance, so unceremoniously disobeyed for the sake of duty, lay there smiling and then—to her own amazement as she thought about it afterward—actually went to sleep as she was bidden and awoke refreshed, as the little maid had said. She awoke too with a delightful sensation of anticipation, wondering how and when this astonishing child would keep her promise of another visit. Nay, she would not send for her lest it mar the charming spontaneity of the occasion and, had Miriam but known of this, she might also have known that Adah was not accustomed to looking forward with pleasure. To her, life had become a weary round of sameness with dread calamity as its certain goal.

CHAPTER XI

CONFESSION

SOMEWHERE out on the Syrian hills a shepherd was engaged in a most interesting occupation. At the door of the sheepfold he was holding a light rod, forked at one end, under which the flock passed as he counted. It was always the last task of the evening.

"Seventy-five, seventy-six, seventy-seven. So far nothing hath disturbed thee through the day now gone. Seventy-eight, seventy-nine. Nay, Master Bold, thou wilt wait thy turn. Eighty, eighty-one, eighty-two. Come, thou timid one, thy mother is already in and calleth for thee. Eighty-three, eighty-four, eighty-five. Now, Bright Eyes, what mischief art thou up to? This rod is a means of counting, but it can be turned into a means of punishment if it be necessary to make thee see thy duty. Eighty-six, eighty-seven. Nay, not so much crowding there. Youth is eager, knowing not that time is long and weariness certain. Eighty-eight, eighty-nine, ninety. What, my pearl, the heat of the day hath been too much for thee? Wait thou."

The shepherd hastily dipped his fingers in the horn of olive oil that hung at his belt and anointed its temples.

"There, so shalt thou be refreshed, and here, do thou drink of this cup of cold water which overfloweth for thee."

The needy one attended to, he went on with his count of the others. "Ninety-one, ninety-two—"

Two horsemen approached, the one behind leading a third animal which was without a rider. At a sign, the one with the led horse halted while the other dismounted and with some impatience waited until the long enumeration was finished. Then he advanced toward the shepherd.

"Peace be unto thee."

"And to thee," the shepherd made answer. "Thou art in uniform. Hast thou orders for thy servant? Quickly, thy name and errand. One of my sheep hath strayed and I go to seek it, hastening lest the darkness descend and I be unable to find it."

"Well thou knowest, Benjamin, that I am Isaac, servant to Naaman, commander-in-chief of the armies of Syria, but I come on a private and not on an official errand. Lead thou the way and I will go with thee."

There was an awkward silence broken at last by the soldier: "Thou art looking somewhat haggard since I saw thee last, Benjamin."

"I have passed through much sorrow of spirit, Isaac."

"But surely thou hast no fault to find with thy treatment. Thou hast a well-built sheepfold: the

long, low buildings to shelter thy flock in storms, the large space for them to roam in when thou dost not bring them to pasture, and the whole surrounded by wide stone walls, surmounted by sharp thorns to keep out wild beasts. Nor have we a hard master to serve. Thy faithfulness and ability will be noted by those who have charge of such matters for the king."

The shepherd's tones were infinitely sad: "Could any reward compensate my parents for the loss of their only son; for their loneliness and grief and real need of me? Could any reward make up to my little sister for the brother who should guard and guide her? Could any reward atone to me for the loss of my well-beloved, my betrothed?"

The light was already dim as they stumbled over the rocks and through patches of woodland, the long briars catching at their garments and tearing the flesh. They passed another sheepfold. Benjamin raised his voice in a shout: "Hast thou found a sheep which is lost?"

Clearly the answer came back: "Nay, we have none but our own."

Sighing, the shepherd went on, the soldier abreast of him.

"I have come to redeem my pledge, Benjamin."

The other's face was sadly accusing. "Here, on these lonely hills, with only the fast-falling night for a witness, and not before the eyes of men?"

The soldier's face flushed. "If thou meanest our last meeting on the way hither, I had thought thou wouldst understand. It was through no information furnished by me that thou wert taken, nor was it by my band. Naaman is Captain of the Host. I have but a few men under me and my authority is small. I could not help thee then. Besides, thou wert in no personal danger, else I would have risked it. It was thy flock of which Eleazer's company was so proud. They took thee because the sheep knew thy voice but a stranger would they not follow, fleeing from any but thee."

A contemptuous smile played around Benjamin's mouth. He unclasped from his wrist a broad gold bracelet and handed it to Isaac.

"I thought thou wouldst be apt to consider this too costly a token," he said.

A pained look crossed Isaac's face. "I redeem it with what hath cost me more: the delight of a woman's presence and a woman's sweetness and a woman's wonderful devotion which otherwise might have been mine. I have come to invite thee to a wedding—thine own wedding—with Rachel of Hannathon in the Land of Israel."

The shepherd was plainly startled. "Thou hast come to ask me to marry my betrothed? I do not understand."

"She was captured about the time thou wert by one of the men in my company," the soldier ex-

plained. "I am glad to say I was able to save her from familiarity at the hands of the soldiers—"

"For which I am grateful to thee, Isaac."

"But three days' journey from Damascus she left us with another captive, a young lad called 'Nathan,' being sore afraid. By accident I discovered her hiding-place, but knew not it was the maid of my dreams, she being enveloped in her wedding-veil, as I afterward learned it was. Nevertheless, I discovered her identity in time to soften the hardships of the journey with food and water, together with the leopard's skin thou gavest me, her clothing being insufficient protection against the cold winds which swept down from the Lebanons. I was quite sure the two would come to Damascus, so I had the gate watched and word brought to me of her arrival. She appeared to be alone, the boy having disappeared, and though she had wandered far out of her way in the city, I found her after some search and conducted her, as she desired, to the street of the merchants of Israel. Her kinsman, however, whom we sought, had died a month before."

Benjamin's voice betrayed uneasiness. "And then?"

"And then I found lodging for her in the house of one, Amos the perfumer, also of Israel, since which time she hath been there cared for, provided with necessary raiment and awaiteth thee, desiring that thou come quickly."

Benjamin's attitude became questioning. "It is now the height of the rainy season. All this occurred months ago and I hear but now."

"Thou art hearing as soon as it was convenient for me to bring thee word. Am I in a place of authority? Do I not come and go at another's bidding? Besides, it was but little more than a week ago that she told me of the whispered conversations which always break off when she appeareth, the averted glances and, almost worse than this, the pitying kindness of her friends—"

The shepherd's face grew white and stern. "Then didst thou think it was time to send for the one who would not fail her? I suppose, Isaac, *thou* hast not thought of marrying the maiden—considering the circumstances."

The soldier sought to restrain his anger. "I did," he answered, "or at least I would have had it not been for another maiden to whom I would have found it hard to explain matters. This other—"

"I see it all," the shepherd responded, bitterly. "Having a little authority and noting that the maid was fair, she was thy lawful prey, whereas the maiden who is surrounded by care and affection thou canst not bear to offend. My little Rachel, pure as the snows of Hermon, and entirely at thy mercy—"

He raised his stout staff. The soldier threw up one arm to ward off the blow but he did not draw the short sword which hung at his girdle.

"Thou dost not let me make myself clear," he said, gently, "but thou shalt know for thyself. And another sorrow I have unwittingly brought thee. At the same time that Rachel was taken by my band, Miriam was also captured, although I knew not she was thy sister."

Benjamin lowered his staff, grief succeeding indignation. "And what of her? Tell me."

"I have myself seen to her welfare, and my errand here is to tell thee of both maidens and to conduct thee to them that thou mayest assure thyself—"

Benjamin assented briefly. At that moment his keen ear detected the far-off bleat of a sheep. Guided by its cries, he made his way to it as quickly as possible and with his light, hooked rod disentangled its wool from the cruel thorns which caught and tore his own flesh meanwhile. Catching the forelegs together with one hand and the hindlegs with the other, he swung the exhausted animal over his shoulder and began retracing his steps. Isaac followed, a dozen times essaying to reopen the subject upon which he had come prepared to speak, and a dozen times being repulsed by the gloom in which Benjamin seemed wrapped.

They passed the sheepfold where inquiry had earlier been made and the shepherd raised his voice in a shout, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost."

Arriving at last whence they had started and the weary and injured animal tenderly cared for, Isaac and Benjamin took opposite sides of the fire, each preferring the company of his own bitter thoughts to conversation. A recumbent shepherd kept watch before the door of the fold. Two more slept. To use the tongue of Israel would have been to insure privacy to the message, but each waited for the other. If Isaac were sufficiently penitent, thought Benjamin, he would talk even though the words came falteringly. As it was, his errand was one of expediency and no real satisfaction would be gained by forcing from his lips details of the confession he should make voluntarily. If, thought Isaac, Benjamin wished to ask questions, he would answer them fully, but why give unasked information which was distorted and misunderstood as soon as uttered? And so, each nursing a sense of injury, the long night passed.

A couple of days were spent in making preparation for the care of the flock while Benjamin should be away, and the fourth they started for Damascus. At dawn a gentle rain was falling. The substitute shepherd was delighted. Since the flock must remain within shelter of the fold while the storm lasted, it were that much easier cared for. To the three whose horses stood waiting, the rain mattered not at all. Benjamin moved here and there, giving directions and making sure that all was well before

his departure. Once he paused and took a sick lamb in his arms:

"I go to bring another," he whispered, tenderly, "bruised and wounded as thou art, but her spirit, like thine, shall be healed with the oil of loving-kindness."

An hour later he was riding across the rain-soaked plain, the other horseman a little in advance, the servant in the rear. The two foremost were quite unchanged, the one lost in the depths of profound irritation, the other in melancholy, and neither speaking save when their common errand made it necessary.

.....
Miriam took an early opportunity of again calling upon the mistress of the household. She felt no sense of obligation beyond her promise. The visit was entirely a friendly one and was so understood. On the threshold she paused with a bright smile of greeting, which was cordially returned. Entering, she found a cushion of the right height, threw it upon the floor and sat down, resting her arms confidently on Adah's lap, studying the face above hers.

"I have noticed how sad thou art, and I think it is the way thy house is built. Thou wouldst not be nearly so lonely if thy dwelling were like ours in Israel: all in one big room with the animals in one part and the family on a raised floor in the other. Of course thou hast too large a household for that,

but thou dost not know how comforting it is to hear the animals stamping around in their stalls at night and on rainy days. Here it is so quiet I cannot sleep sometimes."

Adah frequently did not sleep, but she had never attributed it to the silence.

"If thou couldst but rise early in the morning," Miriam continued with animation, "and grind the wheat—thou art so rich thou couldst have an ass or a camel harnessed to the mill to do the hardest part of the work—and if thou couldst make up the dough quickly and bake it in cakes for thy family's breakfast, it would give thee so much delight. Hast thou never tried it?"

"Not the pleasure of toil, Miriam, but I have sometimes wondered—"

"And if thou wouldst pretend to find fault because thy bread is eaten so fast and thy husband would pretend to find fault because thou hast not baked enough, and he would caress thee and say thou canst bake the best bread to be found in any house in Israel—I mean in Syria—it would be such joy to thee. Hast thou never known this?"

"Not the joy of service, Miriam, but I have often thought—"

"And if thou didst see to the clothing of thy entire household instead of having Milcah do it for thee; I mean the spinning and weaving and washing, and couldst look after the conduct and instruction of thy

men servants and thy maid servants. If, while thy husband sits in the gate, judging the cause of the people, thou wert also considering the needs of the poor, thou wouldst never have time to be sad. Hast thou never done these things?"

"Not enough to give me the happiness of being necessary, but I have sometimes envied those who were."

Adah recollected herself with a start. To be making such undignified admissions! Her countenance settled back into its old lines of haughty indifference and Miriam was quick to notice the change. She took the older face tenderly between her hands and kissed it, quite unaware that she was not expected to take such liberties. Her voice was full of pity:

"Thou dost look so sorrowful. I never knew before how much thou dost need me. I can teach thee so much. I will show thee how to be happy."

Adah thought it extremely doubtful, but it would have been cruel to discourage such cheerful confidence. Besides, she saw a loophole of escape from an embarrassing conversation: "Thou hast no time to give to me."

Miriam pondered. "I will take time," she said with decision, "just as much as I can spare from Isaac and Milcah and their mother."

She ran to the door and looked appraisingly at the position of the sun on the courtyard foliage.

"I must go now," she said; "it groweth late. See how the shadows lengthen?"

Adah, left alone, smiled, then she sighed. Alas, that the sorrow of the House of Naaman should be past the little maid's generously offered assistance, past the ability of the wisest men and the greatest gods of Syria!

CHAPTER XII

UNDERSTANDING

OUT on the Syrian plains three horsemen plodded steadily through the storm. At last they halted, shivering, in the shelter of a great rock. One went about the necessary preparations for a slender meal, another faced his companion contritely.

"I am so sorry, Benjamin. I—"

"We usually are, Isaac, when we see what sorrow is wrought by our wrongdoing."

"I have been trying to put myself in thy place, Benjamin. I can realize something of what thou hast suffered. I admit that it is all my fault that—"

"I have never thought of blaming anyone else, Isaac."

"I wish," impatiently, "that thou wouldst let me explain. I was greatly surprised that—"

"I am sure of it, Isaac. We go along doing what we want instead of what we ought, and we are always surprised when God's 'Thou shalt not' makes us stop and think."

The other made a gesture of despair. "Have I lost thy confidence entirely? If thou wouldst but let *me* tell the story instead of telling it thyself in

thine own way, thou wouldst be better prepared—”

“Rachel and I have been companions since babyhood, Isaac, and never have I been unprepared for her lightest wish, nor am I unprepared now for her dire distress. As for my sister, it will go hard with thee if thou hast allowed ill to come to a child.” He closed his lips in a way that revealed both strength and determination.

The soldier faced him without flinching. “We near Damascus,” he said, coldly, “and it is necessary that we speak of certain arrangements. We wish to observe the usual customs, but our situation is peculiar: that which is usually furnished by the family of the maiden we must ourselves provide. Rachel will need festive robes and a veil and a girdle and a chaplet for her flowing hair, not mentioning the perfumery and the jewels which every bride desireth, and saying nothing, also, of *thy* festive robe and nuptial wreath and the myrrh and frankincense for thine adorning.”

The shepherd buried his face in his hands. “Not once have I thought of these things, but only of her need of me. And I a captive, without even a trinket I can sell, and my flock the stolen property of an enemy!”

Isaac tapped the bracelet so lately transferred from the other's arm to his own. “I anticipated this when I asked for my pledge. When sold, as I intend it shall be, it will provide all and more, but

I am curious to know why thou wert allowed to keep the token. Eleazer's band which took thee is not noted for its gentleness nor its generosity."

"I know not the reason, Isaac, save that I fought for it once and twice and thrice and was not overcome."

His tone was abstracted; now it became passionate: "But thinkest thou I would take so much from thee—from *thee?*"

Isaac spoke soothingly: "Peradventure not for my sake, Benjamin, but for Rachel—whom we both love!"

The shepherd looked up quickly. "Love?" he queried, his mood changing to contempt. "But the other maiden more."

Isaac laughed. "The other maiden—" All at once he became serious. "Thou wilt understand when I tell thee—" but a glance at his companion's forbidding countenance caused him to shut his lips in a grimness which was not lost in their short resting time, nor in the several miles which they traveled, nor even in Damascus itself. Only once was there speech between them and that was as they entered the city gates.

It was Benjamin who broke the silence. "Thou hast told me of Rachel, but not of my sister. Take me, therefore, first to Miriam that I may know for myself how she fareth."

Isaac bent his head stiffly. "It is well," he said,

and led the way to the largest and most magnificent dwelling the shepherd had ever beheld.

To her mistress, Miriam spoke Syrian as far as possible; to Milcah, either Syrian or the speech of Israel, more often a mixture of the two, but to Milcah's mother it was joy unspeakable to use only her native tongue. Unfortunately, this pleasure was not to last. The feeble strength waned fast, and one morning Miriam ran swiftly to Milcah, imploring her to hasten to the invalid. She herself sped to the gatekeeper.

"Do thou send to the barracks and there leave word that Isaac come home as soon as he arriveth in Damascus. His mother—"

For reply the gatekeeper pointed to the street. In company with two others he was just dismounting. The gate was opened for them and a breathless little figure, tense with excitement, rushed into his arms, unmindful of his companions.

He bent his head over hers for a moment, listening to her broken words, then, with a courteous explanation to the stranger, he hurried down the courtyard and turned into that in which his mother's room was located. Miriam started to follow, her mind intent upon this new grief, but a hand touched her on the shoulder and she looked into the brown, questioning face of her brother.

The warmth of her welcome left him no room

for jealousy of Isaac. Both faces beamed as genially as the sun, which had finally succeeded in dispersing the clouds and drying up the rain drops. She guided her visitor to the spot that she and Isaac liked, the seat under the damson tree near the fountain. He gazed in wonder at his surroundings, at the richness and beauty everywhere, marveling that she seemed so much at ease amid all this magnificence. It was so different from what he had expected to find, nor could he understand the greeting he had just witnessed between herself and Isaac.

"Art thou not afraid of the man who took thee captive?" he asked.

Radiant with the happiness of her brother's coming and clinging to him as if he were a pleasant dream which might be lost, she answered quite serenely: "Afraid of Isaac? Nay, thou canst not fear one who loveth someone thou dost love."

He thought she referred to Rachel and it was like the thrust of a knife.

"Ever conscious is he, Benjamin, of the debt he oweth thee. He hath told me."

The shepherd was bitterly incredulous.

"Before thou seest Rachel," she went on, "I must tell thee something she knoweth not I have learned."

A stern look crept into Benjamin's face.

"Rachel liketh Isaac very much indeed—"

The shepherd paled. This possibility had not occurred to him.

"But I think Isaac liketh her not at all, else he would have visited her."

Benjamin uttered an exclamation, but she was too full of the importance of her discovery to pay attention. She continued impressively, looking around to make sure she was not overheard:

"Not since he found her, cold and tired and hungry, just outside this wall one daybreak and conducted her to the street of the merchants of Israel, where Amos and Rebekah took pity upon her distress, never once did she see him until the morning I went with Milcah and we found him talking to her on the footway. He had stopped just a moment to tell her that he and his servant were starting to bring thee. I think he would have done nothing for her at all, not even on the way hither, if she had not been thy betrothed. He would not even promise to help her when I first asked. Wouldst thou not have supposed he would consider her as sweet and beautiful as thou dost and I?"

The shepherd was too bewildered to reply at once. "Art thou very sure of what thou sayest?" he finally stammered, an odd excitement in his manner. "Thy words sound strange to mine ears. I would hear all thou knowest," and Miriam was very obliging.

Beginning with the last time he had visited their home in Israel (which had been a few days before their parents went to the feast at Jerusalem; when he and Rachel had come to a full understanding),

she told him all that had befallen her and what she knew concerning Rachel. He heard with varying emotions, and all too soon Isaac stood before them. On his face was the dignity of sorrow. The gladness died out of Miriam's countenance; his grief was hers. He pressed the hand she slipped into his and addressed Benjamin.

"My mother—" he began and his voice broke. In a moment he went on: "My servant will conduct thee to Rachel and attend upon thee. After the custom of our people I must remain in seclusion until after our period of mourning hath ended. Nevertheless, the House of Naaman is thine abode as long as thou art in Damascus and whenever thou comest hither. My home is thine. And this I give into thy keeping for the purpose of which we spoke. I will instruct my servant regarding its disposal."

He unclasped the bracelet from his arm and for the second time gave it to the shepherd, but his present manner bore no resemblance to the first. Something of the difference occurred to Benjamin. He called after the retreating figure. He ran and placed himself before Isaac, bowing low before him.

"Thy servant hath misjudged thee. Forgive, I pray thee. What am I that thou shouldst show such kindness unto me?"

The shepherd's voice faltered before the other's coldly courteous manner. He went on almost timidly: "My sister hath explained much that I

could not understand hitherto. Surprise and perplexity hath gone and in their stead hath come shame. I would that thou shouldst overlook—”

The cold steel of Isaac's eye might have been the cold steel of a weapon piercing Benjamin's heart, the effect being much the same.

“Thou didst once save my life, which is precious unto me, and I have given thee that which is dearer than thy life, thy betrothed. The debt hath been mutually repaid. Henceforth we owe each other nothing.”

Tears sprang to the shepherd's eyes. “Naught save remembrance and good will. I would that we might both remember this obligation.”

There was no answer unless Isaac's silence and his averted head might be construed in the negative.

Benjamin tried again. “As thou didst once admit thy guilt to me, so do I now acknowledge to thee my fault and plead my penitence.”

“It is too late, Benjamin. Thou hast refused to listen to the confession I sought thee voluntarily to make. Thou hast assailed my motives with insult. Thou hast outraged every feeling of affection I ever had for thee. For the sake of all that is past we must not allow ourselves to become enemies, but friends we can never be again.”

The shepherd persevered although seeming to find speech difficult: “We are both wrong, Isaac. Should we permit the winds of trouble to dry up the foun-

tain of loving kindness and to scatter abroad the waters of bitterness? Captivity filleth my mind with suspicion. Resentment causeth thee to hate. Is it right?"

Isaac stood immovable, without speaking. Miriam, where they had left her, ceased her weeping and running to where the two stood slipped a hand in each of theirs.

"I shall be so lonely now that Isaac's mother hath gone. Thou wilt stay in Damascus as long as thou canst, wilt thou not, Benjamin?"

He sought to comfort her, yet he could not leave his duties longer than was necessary. He would go to Rachel now, the arrangements would be made for their marriage according to the customs of Israel, and after the formal betrothal feast he would hurry back to his flock because it was with an hireling who cared not for the sheep. When the rainy season ended he would return to Damascus for his bride and take her to the home he would prepare meanwhile. The present arrangements would consume but a few days. "But when I am no longer here I shall think of thee as still being brave, shall I not, Miriam?"

"Yea," she said, tremulously. "Thou wilt have sad enough meditations, longing for Rachel and thinking of our home in Israel and of father and mother." There was a long pause. "But thou must not grieve over me. At first I thought I should die

here, until I knew that somebody loved me. Now Milcah doth a little, and I think my mistress will, but I have never had to wonder about Isaac. He always hath. He will watch over me as thou wouldst."

She leaned confidently against the soldier and he slipped his arm around her: "The heart of my little maid can safely trust in me," he assured her. Then, to Benjamin: "Behold, the other maid of whom we spoke."

Miriam looked up wonderingly, not understanding Benjamin's embarrassment nor Isaac's defiance, but neither troubled her. She smiled upon them impartially. "And what hath made it easy for me to love Isaac," she went on, "is because he loveth thee so much, Benjamin. It hath made me so happy. Else I could not bear things even now."

She was caressing their two hands, holding them to her cheeks and patting them; thus she failed to see that each young man avoided the other's eye.

"I love thee both so very much," she confided.

They each smiled down upon her indulgently, and somehow their eyes met—with the smile still in them, and this time they did not turn away. Oddly enough the coldness, the constraint faded before that look as snow disappears before the genial warmth of the sun. They parted in a manner quite satisfactory to the little maid, who beamed upon them both. Suspicion and resentment had fled before the affectionate trust of a child!

CHAPTER XIII

CHANGES

THE death of Milcah's mother made changes in the House of Naaman. Adah, its mistress, was inconsolable, not with grief but with vexation.

"So Milcah will sit on the floor for a whole week and mourn! Of course I wish her to treat her mother's memory with respect. I am myself willing to pay for the mourning men and mourning women. I will provide the spices and linen in which the body is to be wrapped. I will even have it laid in the rocky tomb her people prefer, but I cannot go without bathing and dressing for a week. Who will see to my raiment and my perfumes?"

To Miriam, who had brought the message, this was a very simple matter. "Thou hast so many servants," she began, but her mistress interrupted irritably:

"Thinkest thou Milcah would instruct any who might supplant her? Nay, for jealous is she and sour of disposition, hence doth she keep both my maidens and me dependent upon her."

Miriam was genuinely distressed. "Milcah is not young and much pain doth she suffer at times, for she hath told me. Oft hath she waited upon thee when naught but determination urged her tired foot-

steps. Many times have I wondered what will become of her when she is unable to work."

"She will be taken care of, as was her mother, and in place of a daughter *thou* shalt attend upon her."

The little maid clasped her hands. "Then will I be able to show how I love her. Thinkest thou she will let me make her hair look prettier? When Rachel, the maiden to whom my brother Benjamin is betrothed, was sick many weeks I waited upon her continually."

Adah surveyed the small figure doubtfully. "Thinkest thou the duties of the bath-chamber would be too much for thee with older maids to help?"

Miriam thought not, and with enthusiasm began a week which ended all too quickly, for Milcah resumed her old duties when the period of mourning was past. With fine delicacy the little maid absented herself entirely from the apartments of her mistress, but when three days had elapsed she was sent for.

Adah surveyed her with a half displeasure. "Why dost thou not come without being commanded? Knowest thou not that I have found thee teachable and quick and have determined to make thee one of my handmaidens? Already have I talked with Milcah, and she is not displeased, nor will she keep from thee knowledge that will be of use when thou

art older. Hear thou? She calleth thee. Thou mayest go."

The older woman beamed upon her. "I see by thy face thou hast heard. Young art thou to find such favor in the sight of thy mistress, and much will I have to teach thee, but that thou shouldst be chosen for such honor doeth credit to my instruction."

Thus did it come about that Miriam became necessary to the House of Naaman, and in gladness of heart she began that very day to fill the place she had won for herself.

Far away the sun had begun to shine also for another heart. A month after the Syrian raid Sarah was still upon her bed, a little paler, a little weaker every day. Judith had been her faithful attendant, and so it happened that when Abner came, as he had promised, to ask the girl at the hands of her kinswoman, there had been no opposition. The betrothal "feast" had been held minus the usual festivity, the pall of melancholy having settled upon the tiny "city" of Hannathon. Also, the principals to this strange alliance were not popular. Lastly, there was nothing to feast upon, the daily rations, doled out by Abner, being barely sufficient to keep the people alive.

A few weeks later, as was the custom, Judith went to the home of her husband, whither she would have removed Sarah but for vigorous objection.

"If they should return and find the dwelling closed—" said the woman. "Nay, but here must I remain," and no argument availed to change her decision.

Thus it had come about that Eli had gone to dwell with Sarah in place of the son and daughter she had lost, and Abner, upon Judith's insistence, sent a maid servant to care for her in Judith's stead. Eli was Sarah's one stay and comfort. He treated her precisely as he would his own mother, sustaining her feeble strength largely by his own cheery courage and unfailing hopefulness. Under his tender ministry she had begun to grow stronger. The time had come when she no longer kept to her bed.

"I must live to welcome them when they come back," she told him, and he turned his head to hide a tear of pity.

Never did she tire of planning for the journey he should some time take to ransom the captives, although both clearly apprehended the difficulties first to be overcome. "Yet will we trust in Jehovah," he assured her, confidently, "and he shall bring it to pass."

The first obstacle was removed when Abner, returning from a short pilgrimage with seed for sowing his fields, agreed with Eli that the latter should work on his land for wages, the same to be collected at harvest time. The second obstacle yielded when Nathan, ragged and weary but rejoicing, arrived in

Hannathon. Finding that his mother's home was closed, he had come at once to Sarah's, and however doubtful his tidings it had been eagerly received: Rachel had reached Damascus. At this very moment she was doubtless enjoying the peace and plenty of her kinsman's abode. Miriam had been well treated on the journey and had borne up bravely. Of Benjamin he knew nothing at all and the mother wept afresh.

To Eli the important thing, next after the safety of his brother, was that he now knew the name of the soldier in charge of the party. Isaac, once found, could tell him the whereabouts of the captives. But surprise was not confined to the dwelling of Sarah nor yet to the abode of Rachel's parents. It was also present in the House of Abner. The master had brought the mistress a most unexpected gift: a pearl of great price which he had not sold for seed, as she had supposed.

"The grapes and olives be surety for that where-with I am to sow, and because thou hast been prudent and far-seeing I return unto thee the jewel given thee by thy father. Behold, thou hast what is thine own, yet none but thou and I shall know, lest it be stolen from thee."

Judith, receiving the gift with smiling thanks, frowned when Abner had departed. Throwing the pearl upon the floor she stamped her foot: "Thus hath our deeds power to follow and torment us!

Thou," addressing the jewel, "hast served thy purpose. Why comest thou back to me like a spirit from the sepulcher to remind and to mock, yea to be ever unto me like a live coal in my bosom?"

It had been late autumn when Miriam came to Syria; but winter rains were now over and Damascus rejoiced in an absence of dampness and chill, nor had the extreme heat come on with its irritating dust. The charm of one day had not faded when another began, but the nameless gloom which always hovered over the House of Naaman had not lifted, and Miriam pondered much.

All this time she had never seen the master of the house, but, running across the courtyard one morning, she met him face to face and bowed low. She knew him by his splendid dress, his air of authority, the deference paid him by the numerous servants moving here and there. When he had passed she staggered back against the wall, faint with horror, vainly seeking to erase from memory what she had witnessed. Now she knew why he had not braved the inclemency of the weather heretofore. It was leprosy!

Her errand forgotten, the little maid went directly to her mistress, out of breath with haste. Impulsively she clasped between her own the hand she had thought so white and idle.

"Not until this moment, my mistress, did I know

that thou art grieved. I thought thou wert lonely in this big house, but I have beheld the reason for thy sorrow. Oh, my mistress, would God that my lord were with the prophet that is in Samaria, for he would recover him of his leprosy!"

Adah, wife of Naaman, looked down upon the flushed and eager figure kneeling beside her and gently drew away her hand. She was not insensible of the kindness intended, but it was so futile.

In vain Miriam told her of the miracle which had saved Hannah's sons from bondage and of many another wrought by the Man of God who dwelt in Israel, but her words fell upon an unbelieving heart. Wonderful was it, thought Adah, to have the unquestioning belief of youth before experience disillusion, yet how absurd to suppose that what Rimmon and Baal and Chemosh and a host of other gods could not do, even though Naaman had offered rich gifts, could be accomplished by this almost unheard of Jehovah! Nay, it were impossible, and lest fruitless expectation be aroused and a fresh disappointment experienced, she would say nothing to her husband of this well-meant but wholly impossible suggestion.

It was, however, to reach Naaman's ears a few days later and in another manner. Miriam spoke to Isaac about the matter and urged it with vehemence. He could not resist her pleading, but he was reluctant, doubtful.

"Yea, I will tell him all thou sayest, but he hath tried so many things so many times I fear he will not heed."

Isaac was, however, mistaken. Naaman, commander-in-chief of the armies of Syria and popular hero, was accustomed to solicitude. To him it seemed neither unusual nor audacious that a small maid servant should have suggested a means of relief from the awful malady which was slowly sapping his strength. He paid it the compliment of a brief consideration, wholly untouched by the hopelessness of his wife or the hesitancy of his favorite man servant, with both of whom he spoke concerning it.

Small matter that this Jehovah whom she named was little known and probably much less powerful than she believed. He had long suspected—and who would not among so many gods?—that latent abilities sometimes resided in the most unlikely. In favorable circumstances who could tell? Nevertheless, it was a long journey to Israel and in his condition a painful one. Besides, there were other plans, suggested by people for whose judgment he had the greatest respect, which could not be discounted in favor of one so vague. Nay, he would try remedies closer at hand.

Isaac bowed and withdrew, dreading the message he must carry to Miriam. He told her with compassion in his face, his voice, his manner, yet with an

attempt at cheerfulness which deceived neither of them.

After a little she turned the head which had been averted. "Isaac, believest thou?"

He hesitated, then hit upon a happy expedient. "I believe *thee*, little maid."

"Wouldst thou be pleased to do whatever thou canst for me, Isaac?"

There was a flash of amusement on the young man's countenance. "Knowest thou, Miriam, thou wilt soon be a woman? Already thou art akin to her thou shalt be." He reached into the flowering tree above their heads and broke off a small branch. "Even as this beauty is the delight of our eyes, so art thou the delight of my heart. I swear it. See, I bind these flowers upon that heart in token of my fealty. There shall they remain, and though they wither, that for which they stand shall never die. Needst thou other assurance?"

But she was not laughing. "Believest thou in Jehovah, Isaac?"

"Was I not taught so to believe, Miriam?"

She sighed. "If Eli were only here to make thee understand! But when thou believest Jehovah as thou believest me, then wilt thou speak to thy master with boldness and insistence and he will hear."

Isaac patted her cheeks. "I am not sure, Miriam, but that I have known Jehovah, at least as long as I have known thee. Be very courageous, little maid.

Thy plea shall yet save thy master," but neither knew how long a time must first elapse, nor that this same unselfish entreaty would some day cause international complications.

In the meanwhile an event occurred which, at least temporarily, banished the subject from Miriam's mind. Rachel became legally Benjamin's wife. With all the lavish display and elaborate ceremony of the East they were married. That is to say, the bridegroom walked three times around the bride ere he lifted the detachable portion of the heavy "veil" (really a thick garment enveloping her from head to foot) and threw it over his shoulder as a token that he accepted the government of this woman. In so doing the bride's blushing face was exposed to the fond gaze of her husband and the curious looks of their assembled friends.

Following this the guests broke into song, accompanying themselves with timbrels, tabrets, cymbals, and the clapping of hands. There was no priest, no religious observance, nothing but this public demonstration, but it was considered sufficient and binding. The "sweet singer" now came forward. As a matter of fact, he did not "sing" as we understand the term, but recited in a monotonous, sing-song voice, composing his production as he went along. First he recounted the charms of the bride, calling attention to her physical beauty with such

detail and fulsome praise that Rachel, with burning cheeks, kept her eyes cast down, ashamed to look anyone in the face. Then he told of her modesty, her amiability, her industry, her frugality, and a host of other virtues, real and imaginary.

After the bride's personality had been dissected, so to speak, the sweet singer turned to the bridegroom and did the same for him, to Benjamin's great disgust and Isaac's would-be-concealed amusement. The principals having been disposed of, the indefatigable singer turned his attention to each of the guests in turn, reciting their eminent history and complimenting their virtues at as great length as the singer's knowledge extended or his imagination could, at a moment's notice, supply. For a whole week the celebration lasted. The street of the merchants of Israel rejoiced loudly and there were flowing wines (at Isaac's expense) and much gluttony and revelry.

The happy occasion ended with a night-time procession through the streets of Damascus, accompanied once more by the usual music of timbrels, tabrets, cymbals¹ and the clapping of hands; the usual lamps and torches carried by each individual to light the dark streets and add to the festive appearance; the usual waiting crowds to shower con-

¹A *timbrel* was an instrument similar to our modern tambourine. A *tabret* was the progenitor of our modern drum, though smaller. *Cymbals* were the same to which we are accustomed.

gratulations and good wishes upon the happy couple. The route should have been from the home of the bride to that of the bridegroom. In this case it was from the abode of Amos, in a long and circuitous march, back to it again. Miriam, sole representative of the bridegroom's family, at the head of the chosen maidens, escorted Rachel to the bridal chamber. This happened to be the guest room on the roof, which had been decked with flowers and rendered sweet with perfumes.

By this act public notice was served that the bride had been willingly received into the heart and home of her husband. Shortly thereafter, the bridegroom was left at the door of the dwelling by Isaac, heading the young men, and the public expressions of felicity were now complete. The next day came the leave-taking. Rebekah and her friend wept copiously. Milcah smiled upon Rachel with the most perfect cordiality and approval. Rachel herself and Miriam were both very misty-eyed as they bade each other farewell. Isaac and Benjamin held a brief but earnest conversation in which all traces of former misunderstandings seemed completely obliterated, and Amos lifted his hands and voice in blessing as the newly married pair mounted patient asses and started alone into the hills of Syria to set up that most important of all sanctuaries, a home.

CHAPTER XIV

DECISION

Two years went by and Miriam passed her twelfth birthday. Thereafter she was no longer known as "the little maid" save as a title of affection still retained by her mistress, Milcah, and Isaac, but referred to in terms which meant "a young woman." Insensibly her manners grew quieter. No longer did she impulsively speak her mind to Adah, nor bound unexpectedly into Milcah's arms, nor indulge in the old, familiar caresses where Isaac was concerned, although she could not have explained these changes any more than she could have given a reason for being taller and prettier, as she was told she was. Day by day she was becoming gently reserved and charmingly shy and elusively sweet as maidens are wont to be.

Two more years went by and spring came again, the fourth since Miriam had come to Syria and the third since she had first urged the visit of her master to Israel. More and more had she become a necessary part of the great household which had at first been indifferent. Her time was now spent largely in the apartments of her mistress, or in attendance upon that lady when she overlooked the affairs of the house or rode in her chariot. A few times had

she visited the House of Rimmon, the sun-god of the Syrians, but because it distressed her this was not always required. On several occasions had she been to the palace and, with Milcah, quite often saw the tradespeople and helped make selections of merchandise for her mistress.

Yet these years, so eventful to Miriam, had brought little change to the House of Naaman save, if possible, to deepen its gloom. Adah had grown more languid, more petulant, more sad. The little maid had not taught her how to be happy as she had so cheerfully promised. Naaman, still demonstrating the futility of one remedy after another, was plainly growing worse. Each winter the rains had washed out the roads and made traveling as far as Israel an utter impossibility. Each spring, when the dry season set in once more, Miriam had entreated her mistress, appealed to Isaac and been disappointed afresh at the rejection of her plan. Still she hoped and grew patient.

Once more she pressed her query, tenderly, anxiously, without receiving an answer. She knelt beside her mistress, despairing, insistent. "Knowest thou not that my lord is no better and that Jehovah thinketh upon thy sorrow? Oh that he would go to the prophet that is in Samaria!"

Caressingly Adah took Miriam's face between her hands and looked at her through tear-blurred eyes. "All that I possess would I give, little maid, for the

confidence of youth, but even as the ruthless rains wash away the footpaths, so doth Experience, in the autumn and winter of life, steal away courage and joy. Yea, well I know that thy master's malady groweth worse, but what availeth a long and painful journey with disappointment at its end?"

Finding that neither argument nor persuasion availed, Miriam abandoned the subject and waited until she should be able to see Isaac. The next day she was fortunate in having speech with him just before he was summoned to his master's apartments. Briefly she outlined the last conversation with her mistress and its hopelessness.

"But because thou dwellest in his favor, Isaac, speak thou unto him yet again that he perish not. Believest thou that Jehovah can do this? Believest thou, Isaac?"

"Yea," looking into the serious depths of her dark eyes, "yea, Miriam, I believe."

The time was auspicious. The burden of discomfort which Naaman had borne so long had become irritating, loathsome, intolerable. If, by enduring a little more, he could end it forever—yea, he would take the journey to Israel. It was a forlorn hope, but he would risk it.

Breathless with haste, Isaac paused a brief instant before Miriam. He chose to be very mysterious. "What wouldst thou, little maid, if thou couldst have thy choice?"

Expectantly she searched his radiant countenance and caught the gayety of his mood. "Not fruit nor flowers; not silken garments, nor fine linen, nor choice food, for thus sumptuously do I fare every day. Not even a new timbrel, for that thou didst give me when I was but a *little* maid is beautiful with ivory and mother-of-pearl. Naught have I to wish for save that my master should seek Jehovah through the Man of God who dwelleth at Samaria."

"Then thou hast thy desire. He goeth!"

"When?" she asked, excitedly.

The soldier shrugged his shoulders. "Our master's impatience brooketh no delay, as thou wilt know from knowing him, but he must first obtain the king's permission and the king's credentials ere he dare venture into another kingdom to ask a favor of a monarch with whose house Syria hath been time and again at war."

Miriam was dismayed, incredulous. It had seemed such a simple matter to her.

Isaac smiled. "Thou dost not consider how great a man is our master. Knowest thou not it is an affair of state?"

He left her and she ran with swift footsteps to tell the glad news to Milcah and then, with greater deliberation, to speak of it to her mistress.

Next morning the household was early astir. The general air of excitement precluded sleep to even the most laggard, yet why this straw of relief ap-

peared more able to bear the weight of their longings than previous efforts no one could have told, nor, indeed, did they pause to ask. None, at least, save Miriam. At the top of the stone staircase which led to the roof she unexpectedly met Isaac. He greeted her gayly.

"All is well, little maid, so far. To-day I go to the palace to request an audience for my master with the king."

"Thinkest thou, Isaac, that he will approve the journey?"

"The thoughts of a king, Miriam, are past finding out, but we have a good omen."

He pointed to the opal sky, beautiful in its sunrise tints. "Seest thou? As the Syrians say, our all-conquering lord, the Sun, goeth forth from his habitation with smiles to the arms of the virgin East who haileth his approach with blushes."

Miriam pointed to the distant mountains. "Seest thou the good omen? No haze shrouds them from our view, but even as they stand immovable and protecting, so Jehovah is ever a shield round about his people. The rosy sky, against which the mountains show dark and clear, reminds us that our hope is in the Lord our God who only giveth us the victory."

The soldier stood abashed, but in his eyes there dawned a something which was akin to reverence and more. The girl, catching the look quite accidentally, flushed as prettily as the sky they had been

watching and fled instinctively, even as she wondered why she did these things. Yet she did not seek explanations of anyone.

With armament resplendent and an obsequious group of soldier-attendants, as befitted the importance of the mission, Isaac was dispatched to the palace. Having passed the gatekeeper and been conducted across two or three courtyards to the entrance of the king's residence proper, the guard suddenly stood at attention while Isaac found himself in the presence of the chief officer of the palace.

Each bowed to the ground, exclaiming, "Peace be unto thee." Three times this was repeated.

Each then put his hand to his heart, which was meant to say, "My heart meditates upon thee."

Each next put his hands to his lips as if to say, "My lips speak well of thee."

Finally, each put his hand to his forehead, which conveyed the flattering intelligence, "My intellect delights in thee."

Lastly they fell upon each other's neck and embraced fervently.

These civilities over, they stooped and rested in the comfortable Oriental fashion while they held converse. My lord high officer inquired for his visitor's grandfather. Instead of replying truthfully that he was long since dead, diplomacy required that Isaac relate a tale of courage and honor, whether

true or untrue, which he ascribed to the *other's* grandfather.

Well pleased with the compliment, my lord high officer inquired for Isaac's father, with the same result. Next, my lord high officer inquired for Isaac's master and attributed to him deeds of valor which Isaac entirely disclaimed for Naaman, pronouncing blessings upon the other's master, the king.

By degrees and after a considerable time had elapsed, the moment was opportune for the delivery of Isaac's message. He had come to request an audience of King Ben-hadad for his master, Naaman. My lord high officer was politely kind. He would see that the message was conveyed to his master, the king, and in the course of a few days an answer would be returned. Although his real errand was now completed, Isaac's manner was casual and betrayed no haste, after the approved style of Eastern courtiers. For quite awhile longer they chatted with gravity and pretended interest, then they rose, bidding each other farewell with the same elaborate gestures which had marked their meeting.

With a sigh of relief and a complacence born of duty well performed, Isaac and his soldiers took their way homeward and the House of Naaman began that waiting program which was to be its chief occupation for some time to come and of which its master was to grow almost fatally weary before it should be brought to a happy ending. In a few days,

as promised by my lord high officer, the watchman stationed upon Naaman's roof to note the approach of the king's messenger sent the joyful cry echoing through the courtyards: "Behold, he cometh."

Instantly the great house responded with a bustle of preparation and a suspension of all unnecessary tasks, giving itself up to the delightful thrill of expectancy. The crowd of mendicants, the halt and maimed and blind, pensioners upon Naaman's bounty, melted away from before his gate—at the command of the gatekeeper, aided by a stout staff and one or two men servants—like snow before the sun. The courtyards were cleared of all save those whose privilege and duty it was to be there. Isaac, not now in the dress of a soldier but in the soft, fine raiment of a rich man, as befitted the master he represented, met the stranger at the very gateway.

By means of those elaborate bows which had characterized Isaac's previous visit to the palace, the messenger was finally drawn within the greater privacy of one of the inner courts. This not only shut them out from the gaze and hearing of the curious but conveyed the complimentary impression that he was received into the bosom of the family. His message was brief. On the morrow his master, the king, would give audience to his well-beloved servant, Naaman, at the fourth hour of the day. Yet, however concise the communication, Oriental etiquette forbade its delivery in a hasty manner or without

due ceremony. A long time was it before Isaac, bidding farewell to this important guest, was at liberty to pay a scarcely less ceremonious visit to his anxious master and to stand at length, smiling, before Miriam, that she might hear the joyful tidings.

The next day, promptly at ten o'clock, Naaman and his imposing bodyguard of soldiers appeared at the palace. A no less imposing retinue of palace officials and servants, led by my lord high officer, met him at the palace gate and with great apparent respect conducted him to the throne room. Here he and his king exchanged the same elaborate courtesies which had marked the meeting of their representatives a few days before. Yet with a difference! The latter had been coldly formal, meaninglessly polite. This was the greeting of friends, of those whose regard for each other was built upon a solid foundation of respect and affection, although there was not the slightest trace of undue familiarity on the one hand nor lack of dignity on the other.

Salutations concluded, the king commanded all who attended him to retire from the immediate vicinity. Naaman, following suit, gestured to Isaac, and his bodyguard likewise withdrew to a distance. The two highest dignitaries of Syria could now converse in such privacy that their tones alone were audible to those who stood at either end of the long throne room. Impressively yet briefly Naaman recited the facts: it had become known to him, through

a maid in his household, that there dwelt in the city of Samaria, in the Land of Israel, a prophet of Jehovah, the little-known God of the land. This seer, it appeared, was a man mighty in word and deed, able, so the maiden stated, to heal even the dread disease of leprosy. Now, therefore, if he had found favor in the sight of his master, the king, he hoped it would please the king to allow his servant to depart in peace upon this mission.

Ben-hadad was gracious. The affliction of Naaman, the man whom all Syria delighted to honor, was also his affliction. Any chance of relief, however remote, must be seized with as little delay as possible. If Jehovah, the God of the Israelites, acting through his prophet, was thus powerful, to effect a cure would be but a small matter and one to be quickly accomplished. He, the king of Syria, would write a letter to the young king of Israel, son of their late enemy, Ahab, which letter should be delivered in person by Naaman. The request therein contained would of course be immediately granted. The affair should take precedence of certain other state business so that, in a few days, the letter should be written and dispatched by messenger to the House of Naaman.

Thus comforted and highly elated at the success of his mission, Naaman and his attendants made the usual elaborate adieux and departed. It was not that an interview between the king and his army's

commander-in-chief was either unusual or infrequent, but this had been fraught with national and international consequence, and ceremony was necessary. Not often did one monarch ask a favor of another without intending to reciprocate, but this visit of Naaman to Israel, with its consequent exchange of diplomatic courtesies, meant a closer alliance of the two nations ; a declaration of friendship, as it were, which would last as long as it served their purpose and which might not be a bad thing in these days of Assyrian encroachments.

Miriam, watching the approach of the party from her favorite spot on the roof, observed that the leader lifted his shield of beaten brass and pointed to the distant mountains. She understood. Isaac was telling her that Jehovah, in whom she trusted, had brought it to pass : the king's answer was favorable, and breathlessly she ran to carry the second message of hope to her mistress.

CHAPTER XV

CONSTERNATION

IN that portion of the veranda where stood Isaac and Miriam, eagerly discussing recent events, there was much passing to and fro of men servants and maid servants, picking up crumbs of talk like hungry birds at a feast. With an imperious gesture, borrowed from his master, Isaac made known his displeasure. Instantly each individual had duties elsewhere.

Miriam laughed. "What a great man thou art becoming, Isaac!"

"Nay," he answered, "but if this mission of our master to Israel be prospered, then must we flatter and defer to thee, for thy position in the household will be enviable."

Immediately regretting the contamination of her mind with any taint of worldly wisdom, he ignored her surprised exclamations and spoke of the rich stores which were being gathered in preparation for the journey to Israel, a thank-offering to the prophet should Naaman be healed. Much gold and silver, not in coins—which came at a later period—but in bulk, ready to be cut and weighed according to the amount required when occasion arose for paying or giving, and, in addition, the famous products of

Damascus looms and other Eastern merchandise: silk that would neither wrinkle nor cut; cotton and linen of exquisite weave, and heavier fabrics, all made up into the much-prized "changes of raiment," which would last the fortunate possessor a lifetime and still not be worn out.¹

Miriam asked a half-indignant question: "Thinkest thou the Man of God will regard this? Nay, but only that our master may know Jehovah liveth."

Isaac looked at her strangely. "It is customary, when asking a favor, to take in thine hand a present, and I have never known a prophet who would refuse it. Have we not tried many prophets and many gods? Besides, is not our master very rich and Damascus the gateway between Assyria on the east and Egypt on the west, a city great in commerce and industry? Yea, these things are but right."

It had been a late spring. That is to say, the dry season had been late in arriving, and for diplomatic and business reasons Naaman's journey to Israel was not commenced until nearly midsummer, but the great day came at last. Miriam, her cheeks glowing with excitement, watched it from the latticed

¹It is impossible to translate into modern terms the exact value of the treasure Naaman took into Israel, the figures of different authorities varying greatly, but none estimate it at less than \$60,000, and some very much more. At all events, it was considered a worthy and even a generous gift.

window where she could stand now on fewer cushions than formerly. It was an imposing procession. Isaac, at the head, looking very splendid, Miriam thought, waved her a farewell as they went past the lattice. He could not see her, but he knew she was there.

She gazed eagerly, noting every detail. After Isaac came his servant, carrying a long pole on the end of which was a brazier of coals, the smoke of which would be a cloud by day and a fire by night, thus guiding the drivers behind no matter how far they straggled apart. A bodyguard of horsemen entirely surrounded the chariot, in which was Naaman, with one driver and one attendant, the latter supporting a sort of awning on poles to protect his master from sun and wind as he traveled. A second chariot followed in case of accident to the first. At the rear of the bodyguard rode a man whom Miriam had long ago learned to distrust, Lemuel by name. At a little distance followed the camel train with its precious burden of merchandise and another soldier-guard. Another space and then the asses, laden with food, water, camping equipment, and the various necessities of such a lengthy journey. Last of all came a few asses and camels led, these to be used in case of emergency. A few more soldiers completed the cavalcade.

It was impressive, picturesque, noisy, with gaudily dressed drivers, the decorated animals with their

tinkling bells, the cries in many languages of those who urged them forward, to say nothing of the more ordinary sight, the soldiers in dress-uniforms, dazzlingly bright, with the sun reflected on metal helmets and shields and scalelike coats of mail. No wonder Damascus paused in its business and pleasure to admire and applaud as the party filed slowly and with dignity through its streets and out of the southwestern gate. No wonder Miriam was excited, entranced, delighted. In her wildest dreams she had not beheld it thus, but after it had passed there came a feeling of desolation such as she had not experienced since that first terrible night in Damascus. Almost an hour later Milcah found her, huddled among the cushions, moaning and weeping.

"They have gone; gone to Israel; and I am left here!"

Astonished but not unsympathetic, Milcah attempted comfort, but the writhing, disheveled figure and the wild sobs frightened her. Running excitedly to her mistress, she succeeded in startling that lady out of her accustomed languor and a few moments later they both bent over Miriam with deep concern. Adah gathered the girl in her arms.

"Desirest thou to go to Israel, little maid? Thou dost, thou sayest? Thou art grieving for thy father and mother and thy home there? Nay, do not weep. Thou shalt go. Only be thou patient until we learn how it is with thy master."

Gradually, under these assurances and Milcah's ministrations, Miriam became calmer. Wearied by her outburst and half ashamed, she was persuaded to rest in a darkened room until she should feel quite herself again. To her own surprise, she found she was strangely weak and unnerved. For days she could not rise, and then she dragged about the great house, pale and dispirited, until the excitement of watching for the return of the party brought a little color to her cheeks and a little hope to her heart.

Meanwhile Naaman and his company proceeded on their long, long way in the scorching heat. Unerringly Isaac led his party out from the cool shade of the orchards surrounding the city of Damascus; by broad, rocky terraces to the wind-swept Plain of the Hauran, toward Mount Hermon's rugged dominance in the south. Past wheat-fields and pasture lands, a few insignificant water courses and occasional small groves of trees. Over the plains they went, across the Jordan and up the broad and fertile Vale of Jezreel, brown in the midsummer heat and drought. A twist in the valley and they were in the basin in which Samaria was situated. Up, up, three hundred feet or more to the very top of the cone-shaped hill upon which sat the city itself, impregnable, beautiful, commanding a wide view of the Valley of Jezreel at its feet and the blue waters of the Great Sea (now called the Mediterranean) only twenty-three miles distant.

The approach of so large a procession could not remain unknown. Long, long before it wound its slow way up the hill, among the gardens and scattered houses of the suburbs, the watchman in the tower had noted its strength and its probable importance and hastily communicated this intelligence to the proper officials, who had, in turn, sent a message to the palace. Long, long before it entered the square chamber of masonry which in the Orient they call a gate, prepared to emerge therefrom into the city through the opening in another wall, the elders or judges sitting on the stone benches ranged along the two blank walls were ready with questions. Was their errand one of peace? Who were they and whence did they come? What was the purpose of this visit to their city and whom sought they?

Isaac's duties multiplied. He was now not only guide but interpreter and the trusted servant who should present his master's all-important plea to the city officials. More than this, he was the courteous diplomat who must secure the favor and the good will of these officials who would, at their discretion, give them safe conduct to the king. The examination into their credentials was conducted with great solemnity and consumed a vast deal of time, but with the happy result that the procession of foreign guests was conducted with much ceremony through the crooked streets of Samaria to the celebrated Ivory Palace of the king; those streets so narrow

that two camels could not go abreast and leave room for foot passengers, so shaded from the heat of the sun by the windowless buildings on either side that, had it been more unusual, it would have been depressing.

In the East there is courtesy but no haste. One wing of the palace, with its own courts, was set aside for the use of the visitors, and trusted servants and high officials busied themselves in making these accommodations comfortable for those who honored the roof by their presence. Isaac was granted a formal interview with the chief officer of the palace, the occasion being much the same as in Syria, when he had appeared to request audience for his master with King Ben-hadad. Now as then an interval must elapse while the message was conveyed to King Jehoram and he returned an answer, but in consideration of the distinguished position which Naaman occupied in his own country and the compliment which his visit implied, this was considerably hurried.

The next day Isaac, chief servant of the embassy, received a call from the chief officer of the palace, appointing the hour and day when King Jehoram would receive in person the letter of King Ben-hadad and the officer whom it introduced. Naaman, tired from the long and exhausting journey, was glad to have a few hours of rest, but as the hardened soldier recovered somewhat from his pain and

fatigue, he grew impatient for the interview. The hour came. Amid great splendor Naaman was conducted into the presence of the young King Jehoram, the letter was presented, courteous greetings and assurances of friendship were exchanged, and then Naaman was escorted back to his apartments to await the real answer to his plea; the favorable reply anticipated but not yet given! Though compatible with Eastern custom, it was a situation calculated to inspire distrust in the breast of the suffering Naaman and uneasiness on the part of his servant, Isaac.

In that portion of the palace they had just left the air was charged with excitement. The king, surrounded by his counselors, old and young, rent his garments with true Oriental display of grief and vexation. What power had he to cure a man of leprosy? Was he a god to kill and make alive? No reasonable human being would suppose he could do this thing. Nay, it was merely a pretext for Syria to declare war against Israel. Not content with petty raids on their fertile valleys almost every year; not satisfied with carrying off their flocks, their grain, their wine and their oil, and even a captive now and then; not content that Jehoram's father, Ahab, had spared Ben-hadad's life when the latter was at his mercy, and made a treaty of trade and peace when he might have been less generous; not satisfied with this and all of these, Ben-hadad now,

without just cause, sought an open rupture. And Israel—was Israel prepared to resist an invasion? Nay, but as the ravenous dogs fell upon travelers in the night so would Syria fall upon them and rend them in pieces!

The counselors of the young king shook their heads and mingled their tears with his, their hearts heavy with sorrow. If this thing came upon them—and it had—they must meet it like men. What did prudence dictate? It was a long conference, prudence seeming to dictate quite a number of things. As a result, the king hastily sent from one end of his kingdom to the other, taking account of his resources: the number of his fighting men; his weapons of war; his food-supplies; his gold and silver. His counselors met in secret session again and considered Israel's trade relations, her diplomatic friendships. Was she able, alone, to meet the enemy? Would she have help? Upon what could she depend when this unfavorable answer should be returned as soon, indeed, it must be?

Despite the urgency of the occasion, this census consumed some time and was, alas, in no wise satisfactory. It was a fact, grave but unmistakable, that Israel was not prepared to meet a foe of Syria's means, of Syria's army, of Syria's leadership! Israel never faced a greater crisis. Her king was commanded to do the impossible or else—there were no need to complete the sentence. The veriest child

could speak the answer and dread it, and King Jehoram lifted up his voice and wept in the demonstrative Eastern fashion. Consternation, though veiled, was not confined to the palace. The arrival of so large a procession, its gorgeous display of wealth, the foreign garb of its people and their probable errand could not fail to be a matter of public interest and conjecture. The hopelessness of its mission could not long be kept from the populace, nor fail to sound a note of dismay to the thoughtful.

Meanwhile, in the apartments paneled in ivory, among the simple but costly furnishings, Naaman paced restlessly. Was this prophet of Jehovah on a journey to some far country that he came not? Was there any deception on the part of this young king that he failed to return a favorable reply? Did he consider it a matter of so little importance that he could safely procrastinate? Could there have been any mistake in the information which had sent him hither? Down, far below, into the Valley of Jezreel Naaman looked, but the yellow grain fields merely nodded in the summer heat and refused to answer. Off to the blue strip of the Great Sea he raised his eyes, but the flashing oars of the Phœnician galleys rose and fell unheeding. Toward the hills he looked, but from their bare, brown hulks no help arose and Hermon regarded him coldly from its snow-crowned peak. Weary, puzzled and in pain, Naaman strove, sighing, to wait yet another day

while the little maid whose cheerful assurances had been the cause of his visit, lay upon her bed, in the grasp of a great longing, knowing not that her unselfish plea had brought about international complications and deep consternation to her beloved Land of Israel.

CHAPTER XVI

HOPE

IN a crooked and somewhat retired street of Samaria stood a house which, next to the Ivory Palace of the king, was the most noted in all Israel. On the outside there was nothing to denote any special importance, nothing to particularly commend it to the attention of the young man who walked along slowly, scanning each dwelling with interest. It might have been the home of any well-to-do citizen. The stranger paused doubtfully, asked a question of a passer-by, and then approached the entrance gate, rapping loudly.

One in the garb of a servant but with the air and manner of authority responded to the summons. That is to say, although not opening the portal he called through it to know who was there and what the errand. These questions being answered satisfactorily, the stranger was allowed to remain standing without until the servant within walked leisurely across the courtyard and ascended a flight of stone steps in the corner to the flat roof of the dwelling and so into the presence of an older man, to whom he bowed low and who, in return, greeted him eagerly.

"No message hath come to me from the king, Gehazi?"

"None, my master."

"And what saith the people to-day?"

"Despair filleth all hearts, my lord, and the king rendeth his garments and weepeth, for there be none to help."

The face of the older man suddenly became gray and drawn and he went on talking, but as if to himself: "Neither king nor people remember that Jehovah is their refuge, a very present help in trouble. Yet will not the son of Jezebel hearken nor the people whose minds the priests of Baal hath darkened." He stood silent a moment, then stretched out his arms over the parapet, toward the panoramic view of the city and valley below.

"O Israel, that ye would consider and know that the Lord is good and that thy strength cometh from him, whose servant I am!"

His head sank upon his breast in meditation, but ere long he roused himself and spoke with decision: "We have waited many days, Gehazi. Now shall they see the salvation of the Lord of Hosts. Do thou send to the palace and say to the young King Jehoram, 'Wherefore hast thou rent thy garments? Let this man, Naaman, come now to me and he shall know that there is a God in Israel and I, his prophet.'"

Gehazi again bowed low, murmuring some words

of assent, after which he remembered to speak of the visitor below.

"A stranger, my master, is without the gate, desiring to talk with the seer. He giveth his name as Isaac of Damascus, a soldier. Shall I bid him enter?"

"Knowest thou his voice, Gehazi?"

"Nay, my master, but it hath the ring of sincerity."

"Then shall he be admitted. Doubtless he cometh with this Syrian, Naaman, and seeketh me to inquire of the Lord concerning him. I await him here."

Gehazi leisurely descended the stairs, crossed the courtyard, opened the gate and received the visitor within. Isaac's sandals having been left outside, Gehazi brought forth a basin over which the young man held first his hands and then his feet while the servant, from the ewer which he held, poured water over them. Isaac then wiped off the water with the towel which hung from the other's girdle.

Gehazi now disappeared and a moment later set before the stranger a little bread and wine. This was partaken of with the audible satisfaction which Eastern etiquette demanded—the smacking of lips which told of the pleasure conferred by this attention.

These ceremonies over, the visitor was conducted

to the roof, where the host awaited him. Gehazi bowed low before his master: "It is Isaac, a soldier of Damascus."

The older man forsook his meditation and looked toward his guest. In the meanwhile, he of whom they spoke, apparently seeing nothing at all had yet seen everything. No detail of his surroundings had escaped his observant eye.

"If I like not the master better than the man," he thought, "then shall I know that the little maid hath been indeed mistaken in putting confidence here," and he sighed.

Noting that he was expected to approach, Isaac ran forward, prostrating himself. Rising, he reverentially took between his hands the face of the seer and kissed his head. Immediately the older man extended his hand, which the visitor clasped, and each kissed the back of the other's hand. Isaac's greeting was the tribute of an inferior to a revered superior. Elisha's extended hand was a condescension which the younger man understood as placing him on the footing of an equal or that of an honored guest, yet courtesy forbade him to speak until his host had first taken the initiative.

The keen gaze of the latter seemed to penetrate his gorgeous costume and lay bare every secret of his soul, but the voice was kindly: "What is thy need, my son?"

"Thou art Elisha, prophet of Jehovah?"

"Yea, my son. What wouldst thou?"

What would he? Isaac's voice fairly trembled with the earnestness of his desire, and he spoke rapidly: "That thou wouldst heal my master, Naaman the Syrian."

The prophet sighed. "Neither king nor people have asked this thing at the hand of the Lord. Great love hast thou for thy master that thou comest to me."

"Love and gratitude and admiration and pity, my lord. All these have I for my great and good master, Naaman, but I have come to thee more in dread of sorrow to a little maid whom I carried away captive almost five years ago and who hath brought to mind the teaching of my mother, who was of the Land of Gilead. Thou must know, oh my father, that among so many gods it is hard to know the one supreme save as now and again one performeth some mighty work which causeth men to say, 'Lo here,' or 'Lo there,' but my mother and this little maid have ever maintained that Jehovah is God alone, who only doeth marvelous works. If this be so, thou his prophet canst heal my master of his leprosy."

Straight into the troubled eyes of his young visitor the older man looked and smiled. "It is well, my son. To win the unselfish affection of a child; to love a maid purely and protectingly and to keep thyself worthy of both will be to thy remorseful soul.

as waters of cleansing." Then, sternly: "And to atone for the evil thou hast wrought to the House of Caleb, I charge thee to do this thing lest the wrath of Jehovah fall upon thee."

Awed and assenting, Isaac stood through a few moments of silence on the part of his host. At last the latter turned to him. "As to thy master, Naaman, behold, before thy return to the palace, he will have received a message from the king to present himself to me. To-morrow at this hour thou shalt bring him hither and both he and thou shalt know the only true God."

The speaker made a gesture by which his visitor understood that the interview was ended. With respectful ceremony Isaac made his adieux and started back to the Ivory Palace, back to his impatient master. As he went he reviewed the events of the past few weeks, the disquieting rumors which his familiarity with the language had enabled him to hear in the long walks he had taken through the city with a view to news-gathering, a pastime inspired by Jehoram's delay and Naaman's depression. It was this which had driven him to the prophet. He must know for himself if there were hope.

At the palace gate there awaited him a servant whom they had brought from Syria to say that his master desired his presence without delay. Isaac presented himself humbly, half expecting the wrath which he encountered.

"So thine own business and pleasure are more to thee than mine, Isaac."

"Nay, my master, I—"

"The king's messenger hath been here and thou away. None but Lemuel to speak his tongue and he haltingly and the message one of importance. Yet peradventure I should not have expected thy interest. Thinkest thou I have not marked thy many absences of late and this the longest of all?"

"But, my master, if thou hadst followed me—" The eager tone trailed off into silence. How could he relate the disheartening tidings he had heard on every hand when it could but add to his master's impatience and perhaps frustrate the very purpose for which they had come? The pause was lengthy.

Naaman's manner changed from sarcastic irritability to amused toleration. "I had forgotten, Isaac, how oft thou hast been in this land. I should have remembered thy youth and thy good looks and the charm of the maids of Israel."

"Nay, nay, my master. I but went—"

Naaman waved aside the explanation. "Few maidens are unwilling to smile upon a soldier, but it mattereth not," he said with finality. "I should not expect from thee the wisdom of age. I do not expect it. But go now and make what preparations are necessary, for to-morrow, at the fourth hour, we present ourselves before this prophet of Jehovah for my healing. The mouth of the king hath spoken it."

Other mouths, both within and without the palace, took up the words and repeated them until, between excitement and curiosity, Samaria slept badly that night. The next morning, at the hour appointed, the narrow streets of the city were packed with humanity as the Syrian embassy wended its slow and stately way to the house of the Man of God.

In front rode several dignitaries in chariots representing King Jehoram. Next came Isaac on horseback, attended by his servant and a soldier or two who preceded the chariot of Naaman. The Syrian bodyguard, who followed, were escorted by the flower of the Israelitish army. In the rear came the pack animals, their picturesque drivers, and a few more soldiers. It was a civil and not a military procession, and the splendor and dignity of both countries were represented. Amid gaping crowds the company came to a halt before the House of Elisha. Slowly and as if in expectation of their arrival, the gate opened. The moment was tense with expectancy. As a mark of respect to the prophet all dismounted, including Naaman, but it was not Elisha. It was his servant, Gehazi, with a message:

"Thus saith the Man of God: 'Go wash in the Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee and thou shalt be clean.'"

All eyes were turned upon Naaman, who flushed crimson with rage and disappointment. The Jor-

dan indeed! The muddy, swift-flowing, treacherous Jordan! Contrast it with the clear, sparkling waters of the Abana and Pharpar back in Syria! If all he needed was to dip in some river, he much preferred those at home. They were, at least, less repulsive than this boasted stream in a foreign land. Were they not better than all the rivers of Israel? And the idea of sending a servant with the message! Why did not the prophet himself come out, and stand, and call upon the name of his God in the spectacular manner of the East? Why did he not strike his hand over the diseased flesh and effect a cure with all the ceremony it was natural to expect? The meanest servant could have hoped for nothing less than such treatment as he, Naaman, had received. To put the most charitable construction upon the act, the prophet had evidently not understood the position held by his visitor, else he would have acted more in accordance with the customs of the day. Nevertheless he, Naaman, had not come all the way to Israel to be treated discourteously, slightingly; to be mocked and ridiculed. The long and painful journey had been worse than useless. They would return whence they had come and woe to Israel when Ben-hadad heard!

The Syrian embassy whispered among themselves. The elders of the city and the dignitaries from the palace held a brief parley and then approached Naaman with an air of dismayed humility, with apology

and almost with entreaty, but the outraged visitor was conscious only of the insult put upon him. In the face of his anger all of Isaac's diplomacy served only to ruffle his feelings the more and to make the efforts of the young interpreter and servant appear ridiculous in the eyes of those who saw the futility of anything but surrender to the exasperating circumstances. The king's representatives were thoroughly alarmed. In a few days, perhaps, when the wrath of their mighty visitor had cooled, he might be persuaded to try the remedy, which appeared even to them as questionable, if not absurd. If he did not care to be reasonable, or if the prescription failed, then, indeed, the last state of this miserable affair would be worse than the first. Years ago King Ahab had had Ben-hadad at his mercy; Israel had put her foot upon Syria's neck, but since then other wars had changed entirely the complexion of Eastern politics.¹

It was a crestfallen party which took its slow departure from the prophet's house. Even the horses seemed to feel the general air of gloom and walked less proudly. Isaac, chagrined at this unexpected turn of affairs, heard not the comments of his companions, saw not the jostling and awe-struck throngs, cared not for his master's ire. He was conscious only that back in Syria was a maid with

¹Some authorities claim that at this period Syrian arms were renowned because she had repelled even mighty Assyria.

the light of happy expectancy in her eyes and it must not be dimmed! He resolved it fiercely, striving to consider the situation as calmly as possible. For Miriam's sake, considerations of self were obliterated. Into the struggle he threw his all, risking his future and the favor of his impulsive master. At a turn into the wider street which led to the palace, Naaman, with uncooled wrath, commanded greater speed, but Isaac, turning, wheeled his horse directly in the path of the chariot, thus halting the entire company.

The anger in his master's eye was like a drawn sword, but love for Miriam was like a shield, warding off the thrusts. His voice slightly trembled but he held his ground: "My father, if the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldst thou not have done it? How much rather when he saith to thee, 'Wash and be clean'?"

Naaman, the bluff man of moods, at first irritated at such daring, gradually became aware that he admired it. He himself had experienced great moments and high courage. And there was no selfishness in the plea. Isaac was asking for nothing which could benefit him personally. Naaman looked at the straight, young figure, at the earnest face, at the yearning affection in the eyes. "My father," he had said. Naaman felt the charm of deference from youth to age; the tribute of regard from man to master; the acknowledgment of respect from an in-

ferior. "If the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldst thou not have done it?" He would. He was keyed up to any effort. That was wherein lay the disappointment. "How much rather when he saith to thee, 'Wash and be clean'?" The logic appealed to Naaman's sense of justice. Why not indeed? It could but fail as had everything else. Why take all this trouble and then refuse to do the thing recommended?

The king's representatives looked on in amazement. Who and what was this youthful interpreter and courtier that he dared speak words of remonstrance and exhortation to this powerful foreigner? That he was doing just this was evident even though the language used left the exact sentences in doubt. The Syrian soldiery held its breath in wonder, uncertain whether to admire Isaac's bravery or condemn his temerity. They would decide according to the outcome. Naaman's expression passed through a series of changes and took on the cool matter-of-fact.

"On," he directed, "on—to the Jordan!"

CHAPTER XVII

REWARDS

FROM the city of Samaria to the banks of the Jordan was some thirty-five miles, considerably more than a day's journey each way. It lacked an hour of noon when they started, so Naaman's party was obliged to encamp over night, and it was late the following afternoon when they finally reached their destination. With an eagerness that knew no faltering, no uncertainty, Isaac had led the way. Now, finding a shallow spot in the turbulent river near one of the fords, a spot warmed for hours by the summer sun, Naaman had dipped seven times, as directed, the seventh turning vague hope into joyous certainty. He was healed every whit! Joy knew no bounds. The king's representatives had embraced him and each other. Israel was saved! The Syrian embassy was scarcely less contained. Even the camel drivers from the desert and the lowest of the servants shouted with loud voices and great enthusiasm and Naaman beamed upon them all, but it was Isaac to whom his first words of relief and happiness had been addressed, and Isaac upon whom he smiled with tenderness and even affection.

With hearts attuned to see the wonderful yellows

and browns of the Valley of Jezreel in late summer, their horses' hoofs had again pattered its long expanse, the laden camels and asses driven in the rear. One more night they had encamped and now they came straggling up the hill they had descended three days before. But the young leader had made a slight error in judgment as to the time of arrival. It was shortly after sunset, a few minutes past the hour when the city closed its gates—and no man came to open! Lemuel, companion of Isaac's old scouting days, approached him with a respect so profound that its insincerity was patent.

"Sir, there be not room among this crowd of mendicants," glancing contemptuously at other belated travelers, "to spread our camping equipment with due regard to our importance, and without it we shall find the night-dews too heavy to be pleasant. I pray thee have the gates opened without delay that thy servants may render thee the honor due so great a captain."

Annoyed, Isaac ceased thundering at the gates and became aware of the murmuring among his own party and the derision of the merchants and others who, like themselves, seemed doomed to spend the night with only the city walls for a covering while the chill air of the mountains penetrated even the thickest of garments. The voice of Naaman commanded silence. He spoke compassionately to Isaac.

“My son, he at whom the multitude throws roses feels mostly the thorns. He who by any act becomes more noticeable than his fellows is the target for their envy. Only a brave man can afford to be prominent. Do I not know, I, the veteran of a hundred wars and judged of all? Courage in the peril of battle I know thou hast, Isaac, for with mine own eyes have I beheld, but courage in the peril of success, hast thou fortitude sufficient for this?”

The Syrian party had unconsciously drawn closer together, away from the motley crowd of late-comers who were striving to make themselves comfortable in the shadow of the walls and were fighting energetically for the best places. The king's representatives, in another group, were making a determined onslaught upon the stout gates with their swords and spears. Lemuel again drew near Isaac, this time in hurried pompousness.

“Answer thou wisely,” he said in an undertone. “He meaneth to reward thee. Remember that I have been thy friend, thy companion since boyhood, intimate enough for such jesting as I had with thee a moment ago.”

Isaac shook off the counsel impatiently. His action had been inspired with no thought of reward, save in the joy of the little maid, yet Naaman was rich and generous and a gift not unlikely. If given a choice, he knew what he should ask. He had con-

sidered the matter, but the plan did not include Lemuel. The latter fell back a pace. His words had reached no other ears than those for whom they were intended, being drowned in the din of the pounding on the gate. Naaman, amiable in the delight of physical relief, gave a few brief directions and his party settled down to waiting with whatever calmness they could muster. Audible complaints ceased. At last, on top of the city wall, a watchman was seen approaching from the tower at the far corner. At first a speck in the distance as he made the rounds of the wall leisurely, he finally stood near enough to the gate to survey the assemblage outside. With unsympathetic eye he viewed the poorer travelers and the belated merchants, but a change came over his countenance as he beheld the king's representatives and the Syrian embassy. Instantly he disappeared within the city and the party without drew a sigh of content.

Yet the gate was not opened; that is, not the great gate. A smaller one within the larger was flung wide and the watchman appeared with obsequious interest: "Behold the needle's eye. Enter thou and thy beasts."

The men could get through readily, and even the horses could with difficulty, but hard is it indeed for a camel to go through the eye of a needle! They were made to kneel and then, with much tugging and cursing and shouting their drivers at

last succeeded in getting them through its narrow space. The asses required almost as much effort, having to be unladen and their burdens strapped upon them once more on the city-side of the gate. Finally, only the chariots and the least important luggage remained under guard without while the watchman closed the small gate decisively against the envious groups left deriding and pleading and cursing in the shadow of the walls.

The next morning Naaman's company again stood before the abode of Elisha. Again was it surrounded by gaping throngs. Again had the city of Samaria cause to be both curious and joyful. Did not all wish to gaze upon this great foreign diplomat who had been healed in the Jordan? Did not his recovery mean that war had been averted from Israel? What would he say to the prophet and what part of his goodly treasure would he leave behind? Part of this question had been answered before it had been asked; answered before he left the palace, when he had proffered a gift to the king, a gift generous in itself but small in comparison with what he had brought, most of which was intended for the Man of God.

Naaman's visit to the prophet, however, had an even greater significance than the crowd surmised. In fact, his errand was threefold. First, he had come to bring a thank-offering. Second, he wished to make public confession of his belief in that Je-

hovah who, though Israel's national God,¹ should now be his own. Third, he desired greatly to have the prophet's advice on a matter which weighed heavily upon his mind. This time he was not required to deal with the servant, Gehazi. Instead, with all the elaborate courtesy of the East, Naaman was received by Elisha in person. Not with the abruptness and haste which we of the West are pleased to call "business," but with deliberation and delicacy, Naaman made known his errand.

"Behold, now know I that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel; now therefore, I pray thee, take a blessing of thy servant," and Naaman stretched forth his hand toward the camels laden with treasure, those rich stores of which Damascus was proud and which, brought in this form, was the current idea of wealth.

Elisha demurred. "As the Lord liveth, before whom I stand, I will receive none."

Naaman stared. Surely he did not mean it. This was merely the usual reluctance, the hypocritical hesitancy which might be expected. All over the Orient it was customary to give presents to the various holy men who were successful interpreters of the wills of their respective gods, and none ever refused. This man had a different manner: a courtesy without servility, an assurance without bigotry,

¹In this age, deities were supposed to favor localities or peoples; there was no conception of a God other than one who was local or national.

self-respect without self-esteem, but he was human! Once and again Naaman urged acceptance of the offering, but Elisha was firm. A murmur of surprise ran through the ranks of the Syrians and Naaman turned impatiently, commanding their withdrawal that he and the seer might converse in private. Isaac, sole attendant upon his master, as Gehazi was upon Elisha, communed with himself: "So saith the little maid," and went over in his mind her protests against this gift and his own worldly-wise replies. So different was Jehovah from other gods! So unusual a man was his prophet!

Finding insistence useless, Naaman with fine feeling ignored the benefit he had thought to confer and begged instead that a favor be granted him. "Shall not then, I pray thee, be given to thy servant two mules' burden of earth?" From the land Jehovah was supposed to especially bless Naaman would take sufficient holy ground to erect in heathen Syria an altar to this new God. "For thy servant will henceforth offer neither burnt-offering nor sacrifice unto other gods but only unto Jehovah."

The prophet graciously gave consent and dispatched Gehazi with servants of their visitor to see that proper attention be given the matter.

Naaman's brow clouded as his host stood waiting in dignified civility. Drawing nearer, he spoke in tones which betrayed his agitation of mind. "In this thing, however, the Lord pardon thy servant;

that when my master, the king, goeth into the House of Rimmon to worship there (for thou knowest that my master, the king, leaneth upon the hand of thy servant) and I must needs bow myself in the House of Rimmon as its worship requireth; when I bow myself I make request that the Lord pardon thy servant in this thing."

For a moment the prophet did not speak and Naaman waited anxiously. His was not a nature which could practice deception or tolerate it in others, yet between his own religious convictions and his official duties as a member of the Syrian Court was a great gulf fixed. Elisha's answer fell upon his hungry heart like a refreshing shower on parched ground.

"It is well. Go thou in peace."

The great soldier prostrated himself before the seer, who politely bade him rise, and their farewells over—those long farewells of the Orient—the Syrian embassy turned its face homeward, wondering greatly at what it had seen and heard.

Through the gate of the house just left peered a frowning face. Gehazi, servant to the prophet, had regarded his master's decision concerning the gift with some displeasure. True, Elisha was not poor, but to allow wealth to pass as lightly through his fingers as a man openeth his hand and droppeth seed in sowing time! But stay, should not his own services be rewarded with a little, a very little indeed, of

what this foreigner was reluctantly carrying away? His eyes, lighted with cupidity, grew cautious as they searched the apartments within for trace of his master. In a moment he had shut the gate softly and stepped outside.

Isaac, hearing behind them the footsteps of a runner, looked backward curiously, checking his horse. Naaman, hearing at the same moment, commanded his charioteer to stop while he dismounted. Walking a few steps toward the runner, whom he perceived to be the prophet's servant, he greeted him anxiously.

"Is all well?"

The man reassured him. "All is well, but my master hath sent me, saying, 'Behold even now there be come to me from Mount Ephraim two young men of the Sons of the Prophet. Give them, I pray thee, a talent of silver and two changes of garments.'"

In answer to this request, Naaman generously insisted upon giving more than was desired: "Be content, take two talents," and although Gehazi objected with well simulated humility there was in his tones no such decisive finality as had been present in the voice of his master.

Calling two of the servants, Naaman saw to it that they bore before the messenger the heavy silver, cut and weighed, and the two changes of fine raiment. Well satisfied that at least something of all he had taken had been accepted, the Syrian cap-

tain reentered his chariot and the party waited for the return of the burden bearers. Isaac looked after the trio questioningly.

"There be many Sons of the Prophet," he reasoned with himself, "would their leader, the Man of God, honor two above the rest? Nay, it seemeth not so to me. Somehow I like not this man Gehazi. Never once, in all of our dealings, hath he looked my master or me straight in the eye!"

At the same moment another mind was dealing with the same problem. Gehazi, elated at Naaman's generosity, had been likewise perplexed. To receive a present was one thing, to dispose of it quite another, especially in view of the two servants who carried the treasure and before whom he must act the part of Elisha's messenger as he had represented himself to be. At the tower in the vineyard at the foot of the hill he dismissed the men and took the burden himself, staggering under its weight. Within the house he hastily disposed of his new possessions and betook himself to his master, wondering if his absence had been noted and striving to assume an air of innocence by busying himself about necessary tasks.

Elisha's keen eye rested upon the guilty countenance: "Whence comest thou, Gehazi?"

"Thy servant went no whither."

The prophet's righteous indignation was kindled at the falsehood. "Went not my heart with thee

when the man turned back from his chariot to meet thee?"

The fear in the craven face opposite told its own story. The prophet's wrath overflowed. To have upheld the honor of the Lord of Hosts and then this misrepresentation! "Is it a time to receive money and to receive garments and olive-yards and vineyards and sheep and oxen and men servants and maid servants? The leprosy therefore of Naaman shall cleave unto thee and unto thy seed forever."

Gehazi cowered, weeping and pleading, but the stern edict had gone forth. Already he knew himself to be the loathsome object Naaman had once been, and at the same hour when Isaac lay down to sleep with a smile upon his face, Gehazi rent his garments and cried aloud outside the gate through which Greed had driven him.

CHAPTER XVIII

PLANS

NAAMAN, freed from the bondage of physical suffering, made plans for the future with all the abandon of a joyous child. The first day of the return journey he talked much with Isaac, whom he graciously permitted to ride beside him, the target for both the flattery and the malice of his less-favored associates.

"There remaineth, Isaac, most of the treasure we brought to this land, despite our trifling gifts to King Jehoram and to the prophet's servant for his master's almsgiving. Had it not been for thee I should not now be healed. Behold, the gift is thine."

Isaac bowed low. "Nay, my lord, for had it not been for the little maid we should not now be in Israel."

The great man pondered. "The maid shall be suitably rewarded, but what desirest thou for thyself?"

Thus encouraged the young soldier dared to speak of what had been in his mind since that day of healing at the Jordan. "Yea, my lord, much more than thou wilt wish to give, but if, oh my lord, I have found favor in thy sight, grant, I pray thee,

that Miriam be allowed to return to Israel and to her home as she longeth to do, and that thou shouldst also allow to return with the maid her brother Benjamin, a friend to whom I am much indebted, but who, being a shepherd, was carried into captivity with his flock by Eleazer's band about the time I took Miriam."

"But for thyself, Isaac, what for thyself?"

The soldier gazed beseechingly at the older man. "For myself do I ask these things. Do they not mean the reward of a conscience at peace? And that is something, my lord, I have not had this long time."

Naaman was silent a moment, lost in thought. At last he spoke: "It shall be done, Isaac, even as thou desirest, but more. This treasure will I divide between thee and the maid, and when she is old enough she shall be given thee in marriage. I see thou hast a tender affection for her. It is well."

With a gesture of dismissal Naaman was turning away, but Isaac caught hold of the fringe of his garment, speaking with unmistakable earnestness. "Thou hast spoken truly, my master. I love the maid as she cannot now comprehend and she loveth me, but not in the way I would wish. There be many kinds of love, and when she is old enough to consider such things I pray thee help her to be happy."

Naaman could not hide his amusement. "I see, Isaac, that I was not wrong when I accused thy

good looks of leading thee into experiences. Thou speakest of love wisely."

The amusement faded into seriousness. "Oft have I thought, Isaac, that thou hast shown discretion far beyond thy years. As thou knowest, my steward groweth old. In time he must be supplanted by a younger man, and even now he needeth to lean upon the stronger arm of youth. Where can I find one more diligent and less self-seeking than thou? Behold, from henceforth thou shalt be no longer a soldier, but greater responsibility shall be given into thine hand. In time thou mayest be over all of my substance as was thy father before thee."

Isaac stammered his thanks, but its lack of enthusiasm irritated his master. "Carest thou not for the reward I would give thee? Peradventure thou hast some other request. Speak and conceal it not."

And Isaac spoke, too utterly miserable to be prudent. "Could I be born and grow up in thy house, my master, and not wish to be even as thou art, a man of war? Could I be thine armor-bearer and not feel that war is more glorious than peace? Could I be promoted to the captaincy of a small band and not wish to lead a greater? Could I follow thee and not wish to be like thee? Thy wealth thou hast inherited, but the affection of the people thou hast won by thine own valor, thine own worth. I had dreamed even of this. Once I gained the favor of Naaman,

Captain of the Host. Henceforth thou dost ask me to seek only the favor of Naaman, the rich man." He ceased speaking, his breast heaving, tears in his eyes.

Naaman stared at the dejected figure with incredulity and growing displeasure. Why all this show of emotion over a benefit he had thought to confer? His kindness was misconstrued. His thoughtfulness was considered intrusive. He was defied and rebuked by a servant. Yet he might have expected ingratitude. It was the way of the world. He had imagined that Isaac was different, but he had been disillusioned. His tones held the sadness of disappointed hope.

"I had believed thou wert glad to serve me, Isaac, but thou art like the others: thou wouldst rather serve thyself. It is well that I should have learned this before making any mistake."

With a disdainful gesture he turned from his one-time favorite. Isaac, shocked into full understanding of the mischief his tongue had wrought, dropped to the rear of the chariot and by degrees to the rear of the company, affecting not to see the curious and surprised glances with which his action was greeted by his companions. Lemuel rode forward hastily. Passing Isaac he leaned from his saddle, speaking in so low a voice that even the soldier nearest could not catch the words, much as he tried:

"Thou fool! Knowest thou not his imperious

temper? Couldst thou not bear with his impatience? Thou shouldst have considered only the reward. Thou hast had thy chance and lost it. Next to thee he hath seemed to regard me with favor. Peradventure the opportunity thou hast thrown away will be mine. Behold, I go to do his bidding."

He pushed his way to a place just behind the chariot, where he rode for a time, respectful and attentive. Naaman, saddened and perplexed by Isaac's outburst, accepted Lemuel's attentions with a certain degree of grateful appreciation which gradually became relief and even pleasure, and when evening fell, Lemuel's tent was pitched next Naaman's, in the very center of the encampment, while Isaac kept to the outer circle. The evening meal was long since eaten; the bustle of the camp had quieted into the soundlessness of night; not a figure moved among the dark tent-shapes and masses of camp paraphernalia. Even the pack animals were quiet, but hour after hour Isaac lay awake.

The stars looked at him with far-off, unsympathetic faces. He was bitterly humiliated. Why had he so rashly thrown away his master's favor? Why had he treated his future advancement as a child would lightly discard a withered flower? It was not merely of himself he should think, but what would Miriam say when she knew? The impetuous youth who had never faltered before a foe quailed now, in imagination, before the clear vision of a

maid's disapproval. And then the remedy flashed through his mind. Discarding it at first as absurd and impossible, he ended by weighing carefully reasons for and against. At last he rose and stealthily went for his tired horse. No watchman questioned his action or interfered, but the significance of this did not occur to him until afterward.

Leading the animal apart from the camp he stopped in the shadow of a great rock. He was facing the road which led to Damascus. A little farther along there crossed it the no less important highway which went down into Egypt. It was well known to every traveler and each twist and turn of it had been familiar to Isaac since his scouting days. He would have no difficulty finding his way. Egypt was his destination. There would he be a soldier. The ruling power was always anxious to recruit its forces with any foreigner willing to serve, and how much more would he be welcomed when it was known that his father had been an Egyptian!

Although the decision was made, the young man hesitated. To be a soldier for pay, and pay alone! To fight, not to defend the weak and repulse the strong but to uphold the quarrels of a master he should hate! To leave the impulsive, impatient but kindly and generous Naaman, the only master he had ever known! To cut himself off from jealous, loving Milcah and repudiate the home of his mother! Most of all, never to see the maid again! What

would she think of this desertion? He shuddered at the word, yet it was that despicable thing—desertion of duty. He wavered an instant, then his face set into lines of bitterness. By whatever name it might be called it was necessary. Was he not already disgraced? Had he not foolishly and without just cause forfeited his master's favor? Did he deserve or could he expect sympathy or even respect from Milcah and Miriam?

Still he did not start. Before his mind's eye passed quickly a panorama of all his dreams, now brought to naught. Brushing a mist from his eyes he sighed and mounted the fiery little steed of the desert, once a gift from his master. Motionless he sat in the shadow, staring, for down the road, like a moving picture, came a band of mounted men. Was his dream coming true? Was this the phantom command he had often seen in imagination? And then he came back to realities with a start. His horse seemed to feel the suspicion which passed through his rider's mind and was instantly alert, responsive, trembling slightly, but eager for the fray.

On the company came. There was no mistaking the camels and the armed men, though not a sound of their advance came to the sensitive horse and to the man who crouched in the shadows, listening. It was this silence which proclaimed their errand. They were robbers coming by night with the feet of their animals muffled, their object being no other than

Naaman's treasure, upon which they hoped to pounce while the camp slumbered, exhausted by a hard day's travel. And then it occurred to Isaac for the first time that the watchmen should have seen and reported. He remembered that he had noticed no passing to and fro on the usual rounds. Was there a traitor within the camp? But he had no time for investigation. He lifted his face to the stars for an instant and through the cool stillness of the night sent a long, weird call.

It was the Syrian battle cry. The camp responded without delay, and Isaac, dashing out of his shadowed retreat, led the first charge against the oncoming robbers, made desperate by the miscarriage of their plans and the surprise of the attack. It was a longer fight than might have been anticipated. Their numbers were almost evenly matched and both sides felt that so much wealth was worth fighting for. Naaman's party, however, had the handicap of weariness, for its leader was pushing toward Damascus at a forced speed. Isaac never understood how it was that he and his master and Lemuel became separated from the rest and cornered. He only knew, with the clearness of vision which comes in a time of emergency, that the chances were all against them and in favor of the robbers.

In that moment, also, there swept over him the certainty that he had never cared for Naaman the soldier and even less for Naaman the rich man, but

that Naaman his master was dearer to him than all the world except the little maid. He saw the battle-line draw closer and closer about them. He noted the spear-thrust which Lemuel avoided and which Naaman, though he did not see, would soon feel unless, by a quick movement on his own part—in Isaac's side he felt a sharp and agonizing pain as if he were being burned with red hot lead. His strength suddenly forsook him. Crumpled up on the rocky road, held fast in the grip of a dull torture and a nauseating weakness, the struggle surged around and over him and he cared not, nor knew when it ceased.

It was long past daylight when his dull eyes opened upon his surroundings and his stiff lips tried to frame a question. It was Naaman himself who bent over him tenderly and answered with a matter-of-factness in itself reassuring:

"Three of our men have we lost and four beside thyself are dangerously wounded. The others are able to be about the camp and to minister to the sufferers. We shall rest here for two or three days and then resume the journey slowly. Yea, the treasure is safe and we have buried many of our enemies. But rest thou and so shalt thy strength return."

The speaker gave his patient a drink of something that was cool and refreshing and bathed his wound with a mixture of oil and wine which was supposed to have great virtue in soothing and healing. But

Isaac could not rest until one more query was answered.

"And thou?"

His articulation was feeble, but it was understood. As his master stooped to reply two scalding drops fell upon Isaac's hand and the words came chokingly:

"Safe—thanks to thy fidelity."

And then Naaman did a strange thing for one who was merely a master. He gathered Isaac within his arms and wept openly over him.

"That I should have forgotten how high flame the fires of youth; its ambition and its courage and its boldness; its longing for achievement and its impatience of restraint. Yet of these is manhood born. Ah, if thou stayest with me, Isaac, I will remember, yea, I will."

The younger man looked up into his face wonderingly. Stay with him! What did he mean? He was not going to Egypt. Not now. He was going back to the little maid, and home. He was, however, too weak and too weary to make explanations, so he closed his eyes and when he opened them again the stars were out once more and his master still lingered beside him.

CHAPTER XIX

HOME

IN the House of Naaman at Damascus all was anxiety. As soon as the days were accomplished when the caravan might return, a watchman was stationed upon the roof to give tidings of its arrival, but day succeeded day without sight of the party itself or even a messenger. At least twenty times between dawn and sunset did Miriam run lightly up the stone staircase to her own favorite spot. Shading her eyes with her hand she would gaze long into the grayish distances and then, sighing, descend to her mistress, who, weary with waiting and unutterably distressed at the delay, had ceased asking questions with her lips and now asked them only with her eyes. When no gladness appeared in Miriam's expressive countenance, Adah would sink back upon her silken cushions with one brief exclamation:

"It is as before. We could expect nothing else."

Not even the little maid's confident cheerfulness could rouse her to hope. Added to the gloom of her mistress, Miriam experienced other trials. Her position in the household began to be somewhat uncomfortable. She could not fail to be aware of

whispered remarks, slighting, scornful, amused. If a visit to the prophet who dwelt in the Land of Israel were all that was needed for her master's restoration, why had he not returned ere this with the healing predicted? The delay was proof positive of the failure of his mission. And who had doubted that it would fail? Certainly not they. Had they not said all along that if Baal and Rimmon and Chemosh and Tammuz and all the other gods could do nothing, was it not highly improbable that this Jehovah of Israel, of whom the maid was always talking, could do more? And the idea of one in her place offering advice to her master!

It was on a particularly trying day that anticipation was changed to certainty. It needed not the cry of the watchman nor the tense excitement with which the household responded to apprise Miriam, for in her own particular lookout on the roof she had observed for herself. Far in the distance she had noted moving specks which could be no other than a caravan. Fascinated, hopeful, she had watched its approach until assured from appearances that it *might* be Naaman's party. She had seen the sudden paralysis of Damascus traffic and had heard the exultant cry of the multitude, two marks of respect accorded only the great and the popular. It *must* be Naaman's party! Slowly and with dignity the procession moved through the narrow, crowded streets amid the cheering throngs and came to a halt before

the arched gateway. With wildly beating heart Miriam knew that it *was* Naaman's party.

Peeping over the parapet surrounding the roof, she noted that the household had hurried into festal garb and gone forth to meet its master in the solemn joy of the dance, accompanied by the music of silver trumpets and cymbals, stringed instruments and timbrels. Her place was with them, but surprise and dismay held her motionless for a long moment, then she bounded down the steps and ran, panting, to the apartments of her mistress. Adah, in excitement scarcely less than Miriam's but decidedly more controlled, stood by the doorway, trembling and waiting. Miriam, with white face, clutched her garment and her voice sounded strange even to herself.

"My mistress, knowest thou? Knowest thou?"

She could proceed no further. In Adah's eyes the light of happy expectancy slowly faded—and it had shown there momentarily. In its stead came the old, deep despair. Dropping back a pace she covered her face with her hands.

"I should have known—oh I think I did know—yea, I knew."

Miriam, in utter misery, gazed at her fixedly. "Thou knewest and didst not tell me. Thou didst wait and let me find out for myself that his horse is led and riderless and that they carry a prostrate figure! Someone hath told thee and thou hast concealed it from me. Oh, how couldst thou?"

Adah moaned. "That he could not be healed I felt, I knew, but that it is with him as thou sayest—Miriam, art thou sure?"

But Miriam was gone. With swift steps she passed various members of the elated household. With unseeing eyes she rushed past its master on his way to his wife's apartments, and though he stopped and spoke graciously she noted not it was he. Her objective was a room in another courtyard where the figure she had seen was being tenderly cared for. Here she knelt beside Milcah and stroked Isaac's hand, openly weeping over him; took from the servant the cooling drink and administered it herself; listened to an account of the battle with the robbers and forgot to ask for Naaman, and left the room only when she and Milcah were satisfied that it was quite safe to leave him in the hands of other attendants for the time being.

She was soon summoned to the apartments of her mistress, where she prostrated herself before her master, but he gently raised her.

"Look upon me, little maid, and behold what thy faith hath wrought."

Timidly she raised her eyes as she was bidden and the look lingered. To behold him thus restored! Around the mouth which life had molded into sternness played a little smile, to which the lips of his wife and her handmaiden likewise responded.

"Well did I know that Jehovah would do this,"

Miriam exclaimed, delightedly, "if my lord would but go to the Man of God who dwelleth in Samaria in the Land of Israel."

Adah, with the lassitude all gone, drew Miriam down beside her while the story was told from beginning to end, and the little maid heard with such great happiness that the attitude and the recital seemed the most natural thing in the world and not at all, as it was, an unusual piece of condescension. Nor did either master or mistress appear to remember. The tale finished and questions asked and answered with entire frankness, Naaman suddenly propounded a query.

"And now what wouldst thou, little maid? Behold, a gift is thine."

Into Miriam's eyes crept a certain wistfulness and they entreated her mistress. Adah turned her own away. Like the sharp thrust of a dagger she remembered the girl's wail on the day Naaman had started to Israel and her own words of promise. Yet how could they let her go? Oh, anything but this!

Miriam's reply was not, however, what was expected by either of her auditors. "A gift, my lord? Nay, for I sought only thy good because I loved my mistress and thee."

Naaman's keen eyes searched her face. "We express our thanks by a gift, little maid. Speak thou and be not afraid."

"Then, my lord, let thy gift, I pray thee, come to

Isaac, who deserveth it more. He it is who hath brought this to pass more than thy handmaiden. Thou wouldst not have listened to me, yet wert thou ready to hear the servant in whom thou delightest."

Naaman toyed with the hilt of the buckler which hung at his girdle. Strangely unselfish were these Israelites. First the prophet, then Isaac, now Miriam. "Yea," he said aloud, "and Isaac shalt have his reward, but something must be given also to thee. Speak! What wouldst thou?"

Thus importuned the girl hesitatingly voiced her desires: "Thou knowest, my lord, that with great anguish of spirit have I thought upon the distress of my father and mother, bereft of both son and daughter, and that with great longing have I desired to know how it fareth with them. If, therefore, I have found favor in thy sight, I pray that thou wilt allow my brother, Benjamin, who is a captive shepherd in the Syrian hill country, to return unto them."

Adah drew a sharp breath of surprise and relief, but Naaman was not satisfied. "Yea, thy brother shalt go. Isaac hath already asked this thing, but in Benjamin's hand he shall carry a gift to thy parents. I have told thee that but a little is gone of all that we took into Israel. What wouldst thou?"

Miriam's decision was prompt. "If thou couldst find it in thine heart to give him some of the sheep. Thou knowest he hath tended them until they are

dear unto him, and with a few, my father's flock could again be restored."

Naaman hastened to grant the request. "A few sheep would be but small recompense for all that I owe thee. He shall take the flock with its increase. I will send a messenger to the palace and the king will give orders to his servants that this be done."

Miriam knelt before him, her face transfigured with joy. "So good art thou to thy handmaiden, my lord. I thank thee," and slipped hastily away while Naaman and his wife conversed long and earnestly on a subject Adah presented and which appeared to be of concern to the little maid, since her name was frequently mentioned.

"Let us consider well," advised the man, gravely, "and if thou art of the same mind a week or so hence—"

But evidently she was, for Miriam was again summoned to appear before her master and mistress, and in a maze of bewildered delight soon afterward sought Isaac on the veranda, where his couch had been placed.

"And when I am *daughter* to the House of Naaman, thou who hast taught me so much must teach me yet more," she said with smiling confidence in the help which had never been refused.

She was surprised at his averted head, his long silence. When he did speak it was slowly and with seeming difficulty.

"When thou art daughter to the House of Naaman it will not be my right to teach thee anything. Then will I come into thy presence only to do thy bidding. I shall be thy servant even as I am servant to my master and mistress."

The smile left Miriam's face. She put her hand on his arm and he covered it with his larger one.

"But, Isaac," she began, in a dismayed little voice, "why, Isaac—" and got no further, for he went on earnestly:

"But I am glad for thee, Miriam, truly glad. Thou art entirely worthy. Sweet art thou and refined and teachable, and with the advantages they will give thee thou shalt be second to none at the court. They have chosen wisely, much as they owe thee, and thou shouldst be grateful and pleased at the honor."

He smiled at her encouragingly, trying to steady the voice which sounded so unlike his own, and went on telling her all that the new position would mean in responsibility and opportunity and happiness. Very quietly she sat listening, her hand still in his, but when Milcah came, bringing some nourishment for the invalid, Miriam slipped away to her favorite nook, trying to think calmly. Somehow joy had fled.

It had gone for Isaac also. Over and over he told himself how glad he was for her, and over and over his heart mocked him with its own desolation.

Never again would she come to him with her innocent confidences; never again bring him her problems to be solved; never again would he have the sweetness of knowing that he was first to her! And that was what he wanted; wanted it more intensely than he had ever wanted anything in his life. Once he had craved the affection of another maiden. Now he wondered that he should have been carried away by a fancy. That was a dream, an impossibility. This was reality and likewise an impossibility, and Isaac was unutterably wretched.

For a week Miriam avoided him, as he knew she would henceforth, and then she sought him once more as he moped in the courtyard. It was the same Miriam he had always known. As if they had parted but an hour ago she plunged into the continuation of her tale.

"I am not going to be daughter to the House of Naaman."

He was startled. "Miriam! What right hast thou to choose? Thy master and mistress hath spoken. Naught is left for thee but to obey."

"We can always choose between right and wrong, Isaac."

He regarded her helplessly. "But what will thy mistress say? She will be very wroth with thee."

Miriam shook her head. "Nay, for I have already explained, and she is not wroth. She laughed."

He could not understand. "Laughed? At what?"

"I know not," with a puzzled frown. "What other answer could I make to her questions and her planning but that I could not be daughter in the house where thou art only a servant?"

A long moment of silence. One searching glance and Isaac's thrill was strangled by disappointment. Quite frankly her eyes had looked into his. Very matter-of-fact were the comments she was making upon the sacredness of friendship and the gratitude she felt for his great and constant kindnesses. He resisted the impulse to laugh as her mistress had done. The barbaric joy which her words had awakened died prematurely. In a little while he was the kindly, serious Isaac of her former acquaintance. He drew her down on the stone seat beside him, speaking in a tone of authority he had never used to her before.

"Sit thou here while I speak plainly to thee. Thinkest thou I shall let thee ruin thy future for the sake of what thou canst not understand? Shall I take advantage of thy innocent generosity to thine own hurt? Am I so weak and my friendship so poor, so mean that I will allow thy inexperience to deprive thee of that which thou dost so richly deserve?"

He spared neither himself nor her. He told her of the great riches of the House of Naaman, of its power, of all the advantages which would be hers. He reminded her that this was a childless household;

that its mistress was lonely, needing a daughter's companionship; that he and Milcah would be proud of her in the new relationship, and that she would be able to accomplish much good for the name of Jehovah, her God.

She was distressed at his reception of her tidings. She wept at the sternness of his tone, but her decision remained unchanged.

"Thinkest thou I have not thought of all these things, Isaac? Have I not been to the court with my mistress and beheld its glory and its folly? It would be wickedness to me. To be daughter in this household would not mean to give more time or greater service to my mistress, but less of both, for would not my duties be increased? More than this, as daughter here I must bow to Rimmon, but as handmaiden I can serve Jehovah. Thinkest thou the Lord, who looketh upon the heart, would be unmindful of my deceit? Nor, as I have told thee, would I thus ungratefully treat my friend. Thinkest thou I could be happy were I to take precedence of thee?"

Isaac was sternly resolved. "Miriam, thou must take heed to what I say. Quickly, before it is too late, thou must go to thy mistress and say—" but Miriam had gone.

In her place stood Milcah, shocked and reproofing, as is the right of elder sisters. "I was passing through the courtyard shrubbery and heard. That

she should tell a man what she told thee! And at her age!"

Isaac's serenity unexpectedly returned. "That it should be 'at her age,' " mocking Milcah's tone, "is the only sad part of it to me. Would she were two or three years older! Would she had whispered it, hesitatingly and with a blush! Then would it have pleased me better, but as it is, she knoweth not what she hath said, and when she findeth out she will not mean it."

Milcah's sharp glance encountered one of the maid servants lingering within a doorway, smiling upon Isaac. The sight infuriated her, and by contrast, Miriam's friendly admissions appeared the embodiment of frank childishness. She sighed.

"Useless is it to enlighten her or to chide thee, for Miriam is just Miriam, and neither thou nor I would have her different," and so saying, Milcah went her way.

CHAPTER XX

DEVOTION

THE gatekeeper at the House of Naaman was extremely wise. Old and faithful and trusted, he was an autocrat whose word few had the temerity to question. For years he had admitted and dismissed through that gate high and low, rich and poor, distinguished and obscure, speaking to each in his own tongue and with the manner his rank and errand demanded. For this reason he felt entirely competent to judge for himself of the worth of any applicant for admission, without referring the matter to higher authority. When, therefore, two young men of poverty-stricken appearance and speaking the language of Israel came, demanding to see the master of the house, it required but a moment to decide that their request should, by all means, be refused.

They were undoubtedly grieved and disappointed. The next day they came again, also the next and still the fourth, but neither arguments nor persuasion availed with the gatekeeper. Then they changed their tactics. They pursued a policy of watchful waiting, coming every day and crouching on the roadway outside the forbidden walls from the

earliest beam of sunrise until its last faint glow in the evening. Against such warfare as this the autocrat of the gate was incensed, but not despondent. Others had made like attempts at various times, but had never been victorious.

To the sorely tried youths, their enemy's resources seemed unlimited. By turns he tried threats, blows, indifference, sarcasm, and ridicule, enlisting the sympathy and ready help of the assorted variety of hangers-on who might always be counted upon to linger in the vicinity of a rich man's dwelling. To the gatekeeper's surprise and disgust, it was all useless. Smarting under defeat and in great irritation the old man carried his grievance to Isaac.

"Right hast thou been to tell me," the young man assured him. "Either they be thieves watching their opportunity, in which case the soldiers should pay heed to them, or else they bear a message sufficiently important to be heard. I will see them at once."

Meanwhiie the two on the roadway without held converse in low tones. "Not in vain have we daily watched these comings and goings," said one, "for much have we learned of the ways of the household and the manner of behavior therein."

"Yea, and what meaneth more to us," responded his companion, "much have we learned as to *whom* it is that cometh and goeth: soldiers and servants, merchants and mendicants and messengers of

various sorts as well as visitors of rank and distinction. Of importance must this man Naaman be and of considerable possessions. Thinkest thou he will demand more than we can pay?"

"Thou knowest the alternative," was the grim answer.

"Then," went on the speaker, "also have we seen the master himself, I take it, but never close enough to have speech with him. Likewise hath the mistress passed and a maiden who always goeth forth with her, a maiden very gorgeously appareled and of great beauty whom we supposed to be the daughter of the house save that her looks betray a different lineage. All these and more, yet never the young soldier, Isaac by name, who carried her away."

"And if it were possible," was the quick retort, "I would be content not to see him."

"More concerned am I," pursued the other, "that he should not see me. He may remember that out of his hand did I escape and seek to take me again. Yet to redeem my promise and thy vow are we come, and I shall not begrudge the price."

At that moment an air of expectancy ran through the group outside the portal, a thrill which communicated itself even to the two who were conversing and who, by reason of the hostility offered them, had been obliged to surrender the strategic position opposite the entrance and take refuge under the wall at a little distance. The gatekeeper appeared, beck-

oning violently. The idle pauper group, each individual of which hoped this honor was for him, crowded about the man, only to be repulsed with grumbling curses. The two young men, having learned to expect nothing but unkindness, merely gazed and wondered. At last they became aware that it was they who were being called.

"Come, thou gaunt tricksters. Thou of the brawny arm," to the younger, "and thou of the burning eyes," to the elder. "Thou Israelitish impostors! Come and tell thy errand to the favorite servant of my lord Naaman. Come quickly that thou mayest be gone before he loseth patience."

The two looked at each other questioningly, disregarding the curious and envious eyes upon them.

"What new insult thinkest thou—?"

Out of the gate limped a soldier very little older than themselves and halted before them with a grave salute.

"Peace be unto thee if thy errand be peace. Naaman, my master, goeth forth on a matter for the king. Quickly, therefore, thy names and what it is that bringeth thee hither."

The young men bowed low before him and the elder made the necessary explanations.

"A long and toilsome journey hath thy servants taken and one beset with danger, and five lean and hungry years have they spent in preparing that they might speak to the master of this house concerning

a matter on which only he can speak with both knowledge and authority. So I pray thee, if thy servants have found favor in thine eyes, grant that their request be carried to him."

"It shall be done," the soldier answered, tersely, after a momentary hesitancy, and conducted them forthwith past the sacred gate and the once frowning gatekeeper (now all smiles) to the outer courtyard.

Scarcely had he left them and scarcely had they time to observe the magnificence of the surroundings, when he returned, a few steps behind his master. The latter suffered the usual elaborate salutations of the East with visible irritation.

"The king's business, on which I go, requireth haste," he told them, thoughtlessly speaking in Syrian. "State thy errand in as few words as possible that I may tarry but briefly."

The elder of the two, continuing to act as spokesman, bowed low before the soldier, who was standing apart: "Thy speech is that of Israel and thy master is not able to understand thy servants. I pray thee stand near that thou mayest tell thy lord what thy servants say and tell them what he saith."

A smile played round the soldier's mouth. "Nay, for my mother, who was of the Land of Israel, taught its tongue to my master, whom she nursed. Say on and he will understand. Long hath Isaac's people served the House of Naaman."

"Isaac?" The question—or exclamation—was like the swift thrust of a sword dividing friend from friend. The speaker drew back with hostility in eye and voice. "Thou art Isaac?"

The soldier wonderingly assented.

"Then thou art he who hath brought us hither. Five years and more," sternly, "hast the captivity of a maid been on thy conscience, if thou hast a conscience; a maid whom thy soldiers stole from Hannathon in the Land of Israel."

Surprise, resentment, and then infinite sadness overspread Isaac's countenance. "Nay," he said gently, "not five, but twenty-five, fifty, an hundred, hath been the years of my remorse."

The travelers exchanged glances.

"Then do we not need to be told how it hath fared with the maiden," said the spokesman, and turned his back upon the soldier, addressing Naaman in the tongue of Israel.

"Thy servants be Eli and Nathan, from the city of Hannathon in the Land of Israel, and we have come to redeem out of thy hand this captive maid, Miriam by name."

Naaman frowned, and he spoke slowly. "Thy words do I comprehend but not thy meaning. 'Redeem,' thou sayest."

Out of his bosom Eli drew a piece of sheepskin, which he carefully unwrapped, displaying two huge bracelets and a ring.

"When these are weighed, my lord, thou wilt find that they are of considerable value."

Naaman exchanged a look with Isaac and assumed an air of sternness. "And when the truth is known thou wilt be found to have stolen them."

On the faces of the two young men was blank despair. "Say not so, my lord. It is the product of five years and more of toil for us in the fields and vineyards of Abner of Hannathon. Robbed of his flocks and herds and his stores of oil and wine by the same hand which made Miriam's parents desolate"—he paused and cast a contemptuous glance at Isaac, who winced as if he had received a blow—"naught had he left but his land, so he agreed with us for wages, and the God of our fathers, who heard the sighs of the maid in captivity, also prospered Abner and us."

Naaman surveyed the jewelry appraisingly. "Five years' wages for two would scarcely equal their value. Thou hast obtained them by fraud. Peradventure even now he for whom thou wert hirelings mourneth his loss."

Genuinely distressed, tears came to the eyes of Eli. "Nay," he said, eagerly, "my lord misjudgeth his servants. Privation hath been sister unto Toil and both have been sweet unto us for the hope wherewith we were comforted. My lord can see that these be the hands of workers—" he stretched open palms toward Naaman and commanded Na-

than to do likewise. "These are not the hands of those who live delicately on the earnings of others."

Naaman surveyed their hardened and calloused hands, to which his attention had been directed, but he saw yet more: their emaciated appearance, their coarse clothing, above all, their earnestness, but he seemed to find no words.

Slowly Eli drew from his bosom another and yet smaller piece of sheepskin and unwrapping it, passed it without speaking to Naaman. The latter looked long and with surprise, examining it diligently and commenting briefly.

"It is a pearl of great price. It hath never belonged to thee."

"Never," assented the spokesman. "It is a gift from Judith, kinswoman to Miriam and wife of Abner, who considereth herself to blame for Miriam's capture. Loath was I to take it, but she besought me with tears and we reflected that what might mean much to the maid was but a little thing to Abner, so we hearkened to his wife."

The conversation was interrupted momentarily when Lemuel, bowing low and with many apologies, crossed the courtyard hurriedly and whispered a message in Naaman's ear. With a hasty glance at the sun the great captain turned to Eli.

"Put up thy jewels into thy bosom. Very dear unto her mistress is the maid, and the sum thou canst offer tempts me not. Nay, for I would tell thee—"

With one dismayed look at his brother Eli spoke again with calm finality: "Then one thing more do we bring my lord, all that we have to give. Let, I pray thee, thy servants remain as thy bondmen and let the maid return to Israel and to the mother who yearneth for her."

The younger brother now advanced, prostrating himself and echoing Eli's request: "Let Nathan and Eli serve thee as thou seest fit, but let not the maid remain in captivity."

Frank admiration beamed from Naaman's countenance. "Nay, not as bondmen shalt thou remain in this house, but as guests. Meat and drink shall be set before thee and changes of raiment shall be brought. Thou shalt see the maid and have audience with her mistress. Much of gratitude and affection do we owe Miriam, and if it please my wife to let her go into Israel, naught of what thou hast offered would we take, but a gift should she carry in her hand. Already hath request for the maiden's freedom been made by my well-beloved servant, Isaac, and—"

Toward the gate they had entered flitted a smiling maiden, attended by an older woman and a maid servant. She stopped to pick a flower from the courtyard garden. Two women passed and she spoke to each, not with familiar chat, but with pleasant authority, both hurrying off to do her bidding. As the three entered a chariot which was in waiting

and to which she was assisted with every mark of respect, she turned her head and the visitors saw that it was the gorgeously appareled maiden they had once supposed to be the daughter of the house.

“Behold,” said Naaman, “the maid whom thou seekest. She goeth—”

A rush of faintness caused Eli to lean heavily upon his brother. It was not *this* Miriam for whose sake they had toiled and suffered, but a Miriam poor and abused and possibly degraded. Upon the stone floor of the courtyard Eli fell. It was the tragedy of an unnecessary sacrifice.

CHAPTER XXI

TIDINGS

SOMEWHERE out on the Syrian hills a mother caressed her babe. "Awakest thou, little one? Knowest thou that when thine eyes open it is as if sunrise had come and when thou closest them again it is as sunset?"

The exultation went out of her face, but the tenderness remained in her voice. "To think, joy of my life, that thou shalt never know thine own people! Never shall the eyes of thy father's father or thy mother's mother behold thy sweetness and delight in thee."

The next words came with a low intensity like the fierce growl of some mother-beast called upon to defend her young: "Always shalt thou be a stranger in a strange land with not even memories, such as thy father and I enjoy, to console thee. Scorn and misunderstanding and bitterness of spirit shall be thy portion forever. O little son, dearly as I love thee, how can I bear to see thee grow into manhood thus?" Her bosom heaved and her eyes suffused with tears.

She was startled by a long, low peal of thunder and a great gust of wind which blew violently into

the tent through the raised flap. With the babe in her arms she went quickly to this opening, which served as both door and window, and peered out anxiously. A few large drops of rain were already falling, giving promise of the deluge which came suddenly, even as she looked. For some reason the babe wrinkled up its tiny face and began to wail. The woman, with a quick movement, let fall the curtain flap and retreated from the entrance, soothing the child meanwhile.

“Nay, little son, it is not Rimmon, whom these Syrians sometimes worship as the sun-god and sometimes as the storm-god. He is not, as they believe, punishing his people for their sins, lashing them with the fury of the storm. It is Jehovah, sending rain that grass may grow upon the hills to provide food for his creatures. Surely, none knowest better than thy mother that he is of tender mercy. Nay,” as the cries grew louder, “weep not even for thy father. Long before thou and I thought of rain he had sensed the storm and securely hidden his sheep in some cave of the mountains where the forethought of the shepherds hath already stored food for such emergencies. Skillful and tender and watchful is thy father. The worst for us is that we shall have to spend the night alone, so far from the sheepfold and the tents of other shepherds. Shall we sit here, just within the door, where we can see what passeth without, heart’s delight?”

Suiting the action to the word she lifted the tent-flap a little and peered out, uttering an exclamation. "It is hard to see through the blinding rain and the wind, sweet one, but someone cometh."

Again she looked. "It is not sheep, and so I know it is not thy father. Rather it seemeth like a chariot. Yea, it is a chariot with horsemen before and behind."

She clasped the babe to her in an agony of apprehension. "Only king's messengers ride with chariot and horsemen. They come in haste, as if on urgent business. They will stop when they see the tent and seek shelter from the storm. And thou and I alone!"

Scarcely had she ceased speaking when she detected that the little company was, as she feared, preparing to halt. The foremost horseman dismounted and, approaching the tent, entered with an air of insolent authority. The woman, face to face with her intruder-guest, drew back in fear. He smiled triumphantly.

"Twice," he said, "nay, thrice hast thou escaped me. Once in the gorge in Israel when thou fedest wild pigeons and knew not thou wert observed; once as we journeyed toward Damascus, and again in Damascus itself. Thrice had I thee in my power. Wert thou not *my* captive? Thrice hast thou escaped through the help of thy friend—peradventure more than friend—Isaac."

The woman lifted her head proudly, resenting the

sneer, a torrent of indignant denials on the end of her tongue, but his manner immediately became conciliatory: "Yet though the gods, who have ever been kind to me, have brought thee into my hand once more, and there be no Isaac near to secure thy release, thou hast no cause for alarm. Only speak thou favorably of me to the maiden I have brought hither and all shall be well with thee and with thy husband and babe. Refuse, and—"

His words were cut short by the arrival of the rest of the party, who crowded into the tent uncere- moniously, but though the threat was unspoken, the woman shuddered. It was as if personified Evil had intruded into the sacredness of Home. Retreating as far as possible into the dim shadows of the tent's interior, she watched apathetically the entrance of two women, heavily veiled. That they were persons of importance was evidenced by the deference with which they were treated by the soldier-escort, chief of whom was Lemuel.

The older woman was speaking querulously: "Never should we have come to seek those who are but wayfarers. Saidst I not to thee that only storms and uncertainty would be our portion?"

Her companion, evidently much younger, answered, soothingly: "Yea, and many more discouragements didst thou prophesy, but said we not that none of them should delay the message of joy we carry, for is not Jehovah able to deliver us out

of them all? See how he hath now provided shelter for us."

Lemuel, dropping the tent-flap, which he had held as the two entered, bowed deferentially to the last speaker: "Rightly hast thou spoken, Miriam. Blessed be the name of Jehovah, as I learned in our recent visit to Israel."

It was noticeable that the girl did not return the smile but drew away somewhat coldly. The woman within the shadows suddenly recovered her self-possession, noting that this was the tongue of Israel and not the despised Syrian. Hastening forward she spoke those courteous words of greeting which no Oriental householder would, under any circumstances, omit, placing her services and her possessions entirely at the disposal of the strangers and drawing the two females of the party into the woman's portion of the tent while the men made themselves quite at home in the other and larger section.

The younger traveler received these kindly ministrations of her hostess with a wondering hesitancy. "Thou art not—thou canst not be—" she began, then, throwing aside the drenched veil worn on the journey, she peered intently into the face which could not be seen plainly in the semi-darkness.

"Thy voice," she continued, "and what I can see of thy countenance—" and then a glad cry rang out: "Thou *art* she whom Milcah and I have sought, lo,

these many days. Thou art Rachel, wife of my brother Benjamin. Blessed be the name of Jehovah, who hath brought us to thee safely!"

"Yea, blessed be the name of Jehovah!" piously echoed the men of the party, but two of them exchanged glances partly amused and partly sinister yet altogether significant.

It was an evening of joy. After the tiny lamps had been lighted and the wayfarers had eaten, Rachel listened to Miriam's recital in amazed incredulity.

"That we should return to Israel when we had despaired of seeing our kindred again! That our son should be reared in the land of Jehovah instead of in this country of many gods! And that we should return as thou sayest, not as those who flee from an enemy but with a gift in our hand, the sheep that Benjamin loveth, nay, I have not heard aright. Truly thy master is good unto thee and unto us. And thou wilt come also?"

For a moment Miriam struggled with emotion. "Nay," she declared with sad finality, "thou must know that since my master's healing at the hands of the Man of God, Jehovah only doth our household worship and there be none to teach them his ways when I am gone. Besides, is it not Benjamin and the flock which will be of most help to our parents? What am I that I should ask more when I have already been granted much?"

Her lip quivered and very unexpectedly she found herself weeping in Rachel's arms. The cords of captivity, however entwined with love, have ever been found to cut the very heart-strings! The storm without almost drowned conversation within and very early, sleeping mats were unrolled in both sections of the tent, the lights were extinguished and silence reigned.

All day long the same rain had dripped and drizzled upon the streets of Damascus, driving its inhabitants to shelter. All day long the several courtyards of Naaman's house had been deserted and the two young men from Israel, guests for several days under its hospitable roof, waited in isolation and impatience for the interview they had been promised with Miriam and her mistress. Instead, a servant had come with a courteous message to the effect that the maiden was on a short journey and Adah was indisposed, but it was hoped it would please them to abide there for a time, and so they had remained.

Some time during the night the wind changed and drove a fine spray through the lattice, sprinkling the sleepers below and slapping them in the face with its raw breath. Nathan sprang to his feet with an exclamation of disgust, dragged his quilt-mattress to another and dryer part of the room and was soon dreaming again that he was a soldier with a commander who looked extremely like Isaac.

Eli too arose, but with greater deliberation. Peering through the lattice into the inky blackness without, he sighed. "Rain coming with a quiet steadiness that seemeth to deluge my heart with its cold torrent. Persistence hath the power of accomplishment. Already are the roads washed out and a long winter must we remain in Syria before travel to Israel will be safe or comfortable. And the mother, old before her time, bent under the weight of misfortune like an olive tree before a storm, can she endure? So different hath been our coming from all we had planned! To find the maid well treated, even honored and beloved, how it would hearten the mother could we but send her word! And yet—what if Miriam should not wish to go?"

Others there were in the House of Naaman who felt the wind's rough caress. Isaac, in no wise discomfited by the spray, as became a soldier, merely moved away from the lattice, but drowsiness had fled. A thought of Miriam came to him. She would be greatly disappointed that she must wait throughout the long, wet months of winter, for when she should learn that Eli had come, she would desire to start for Israel at once. Now the rain had made it impossible and his heart was filled with a great pity, even though her going meant more to him than he dared to dwell upon. Perhaps, in all that great abode, Adah, its mistress, alone felt pleased over the storm. Staring into space with

wide-open eyes for hours, she had listened to the rain's gentle patter, listened with a kind of fierce joy.

"Until spring Miriam cannot go," she whispered to herself. "Months must she abide here. Blessed respite! But how can I spare her at all? She who hath been the sunshine, the courage, the hope in our time of darkness and distress. She who hath taught me to be happy as she said she would. Ah, empty will be the house and dreary the days without our little maid!"

For two days the storm expended its fury. The third dawned clear, and a wind which threatened to tear down the tent dried the soaked earth. The fourth found Benjamin, with his sheep, pushing forward with as much speed as the safety of his flock would permit, anxious for the welfare of his loved ones. He was surprised and delighted to greet his unexpected guests, and with a joy scarcely less restrained than Rachel's listened to the wondrous tale his sister had traveled so many miles to bring him.

"But thou also shalt ask to go. Behold, is not the House of Naaman indebted to thee?"

Miriam shook her head. "There is no debt, but if there were, would it not be more than repaid when thou and thy flock are restored to those who need both? And thou wilt tell my mother that I have kept the Lord alway before my face, even as she bade me promise."

The voice faltered, and Benjamin put an arm about her. "Be of good courage, little maid. Thinkest thou Isaac will let thee weep for thy kindred? Nay, but he will speak to his master and he to thy mistress, and when we start for Israel in the spring thou shalt go also. Rest thou in hope."

Miriam tried to smile and, saddened that the storm should have rendered her errand futile, but rejoicing in the confidence it had inspired, she lingered yet another day and took her departure. Almost at the last moment Rachel drew her aside for a whispered word.

"Put no confidence in this Lemuel who hath charge of thy party. Not now can I explain, but I fear for thee if thou dost trust him."

Miriam nodded. "Isaac told me the same and wished greatly that I wait until he should be well enough to bring me himself or spare his servant, but the tidings seemed too joyful to delay."

Milcah, Miriam's perpetual shadow, put in a word: "And so my brother besought his master that I be allowed to come with the maiden, and our mistress, who can deny her nothing, hastened the plans lest disappointment befall her."

At a little distance Lemuel was talking confidentially with a fellow soldier. "Pleased am I that our errand hath ended well," he was saying.

"Yea," rejoined the other with a sneering smile, "pleased if it please the maid and, better still, pleased

if it please her master and mistress, for very dear unto them is Miriam since Naaman's healing. So shall thine own schemes be furthered."

Lemuel frowned. "My creditors agreed to wait."

"And the gods, whom thou art always boasting have thee in their favor, have given thee this opportunity. How much thinkest thou is the treasure which hath been given to the maid?"

But it was time for the little company to start back to Damascus and with a sigh of relief Lemuel took his place at its head. He gritted his teeth as, obeying his order, the man to whom he had been speaking took a place in the rear.

"Better were this Jehovah-worshiping maid than thy insolence," he said under his breath. "May the gods help me to find favor in the eyes of the maid and most of all in the eyes of her mistress, who holdeth the maid's future and the maid's fortune in her hands!"

CHAPTER XXII

MEETINGS

IN a guest chamber of the House of Naaman Nathan hovered anxiously around his brother. They had heard the happy announcement of Miriam's return, had seen the great house transformed into a scene of busy festivity as if some honored guest were about to arrive, had even stood at a distance and observed the bit of rivalry between the soldier who had brought her hither and Isaac, who assisted her to alight from the chariot into the arms of her waiting mistress, had noted the happiness in her countenance and had turned away, sick at heart. Later the servant who had been in almost constant attendance upon them had come to name the hour when they would be conducted to Adah's apartments, but for the present they were quite alone.

Eli spoke dully, his whole attitude one of extreme dejection: "Strong were we to labor when we thought of the maid despised and ill-treated. Sacrifice was as sweet to us as the cool air of morn. Joyful were we as they who conquer in battle when we had this—and this—and this—" touching the separate pieces of jewelry which lay in a glittering heap beside him. "Enough and more did we deem

them for her ransom, yet how little it profiteth! All of her impressionable years have been spent in the midst of such plenty, such riches as we in Israel knew not existed save in kings' houses. Nor hath she been required to labor. Peradventure she scorneth toil. Her master refuseth to let her go, and she would not wish to be redeemed even if we had sufficient gold to purchase her freedom."

He regarded the jewelry at his side with disdain. "Take it, Nathan. Let me never see it more nor speak thou of it to me. Wasted is our work, ill-spent are our years, blasted are our hopes. It is as a pomegranate tree which a man planteth in his vineyard and careth for, and lo, when it might have borne, the frost killeth it."

He relapsed into bitter musings while his brother took the gold as he was bidden and, wrapping it carefully in its sheepskin coverings, put it in his bosom. Eli silently passed him the pearl, but neither of them looked at it, nor did they observe a figure which approached stealthily, peered through the partially opened door, and departed a little distance, remaining near enough, however, to note the comings and goings from that particular portal.

Eli was speaking again in the same despondent tone: "Peradventure she will have for us naught but contempt, and brought up in this heathen splendor she may not even care to remember her home in Israel, nor the mother who weepeth for her, nor the

God of her fathers. Come, let us return before her words and actions reveal to us this shame. In an hour we are to see her, so the servant hath said. Let us hasten and depart lest a greater sorrow be ours."

Nathan pressed him back into the seat from which he had risen. "Thou art beside thyself with grief and disappointment. Nay, but we will see the maid. We will tell her wherefore we are come. If she hath forgotten aught she should remember, we will teach her gently and patiently as a mother teacheth her babe, and we will plead for that mother whose heart will break if we return with ill news. Nay, but we will quit ourselves like men, and if there be blame, it shall be upon the maid and not upon us. Do thou remain here while I step into the courtyard and see if the servant cometh who is to conduct us to the apartments of her mistress. Wait, I say, until my return."

And Eli waited. As Nathan crossed the threshold no servant was in sight, and, attempting to shake off the gloom which weighed upon him in spite of attempted cheerfulness, he walked slowly down the courtyard, turned into an adjoining one and crossed to yet another before he realized, with a start, that he was in unfamiliar surroundings. Lost in thought, he had not noticed that he was followed. Now, halting in confusion and seeking to recall how he had come, he was confronted by a figure oddly

familiar. There was neither formal salutation nor friendly greeting, but only a look of insolent amusement.

"So thou hast changed thy mind," said the newcomer. "Once thou didst refuse to remain in the company which would have brought thee straight to this house. Five years later thou hast come of thine own free will. Peradventure reflection hath brought wisdom, yet thou shouldst have known it was dangerous."

Nathan was startled. The speaker continued.

"Isaac knew thee not yesterday, but thou couldst not so deceive me. Thou art the lad who once escaped out of his hand."

Nathan considered it prudent to appear fearless. "Thou art Lemuel," he said, slowly, "the soldier who captured Miriam and me in Israel."

"Thou hast guessed rightly," went on the other. "I am Lemuel, who forgetteth neither friend nor foe. One word from me to my master, Naaman, and thou wouldst indeed serve as bond-servant, not willingly but by right, for wert thou not fairly taken in war?"

Nathan determined upon escape, but the watchful Lemuel laid a detaining hand upon his shoulder. "Yet I may not speak that word, or, speaking it, may soften the tone with a gift. Thou canst procure thine own ransom more easily than the maiden's. The same gold intrusted to me for my

master—" he paused to give the better effect to his words.

Nathan was distressed.

"Or the pearl," went on Lemuel, "and it may require all. Thy fate is in thine own hands. Come, what sayest thou? Which shall it be, thy freedom or thy gold? Thou hast not long to debate the matter. Thinkest thou I know not that the treasure is even now in thy bosom?"

Nathan gave the speaker a quick glance of anxiety. How could he know that?

"Come," continued his tormentor, "what is the word that I shall speak?"

Before the now thoroughly frightened lad could frame a reply, Isaac stood before them. Frowningly he addressed himself to Lemuel.

"I will carry the word to our master, the word that a guest in his house hath been intimidated and an attempt made to rob him of his possessions. I will not soften it, neither will he."

Lemuel held up a deprecating hand. "Thou art too harsh. Thou dost not remember that the lad was a prisoner, taken in open warfare. Should he not purchase his ransom?"

Isaac replied by a look, one long look of scorn and indignation, and Lemuel departed, failing miserably to maintain his old-time swagger. Isaac watched him, his lip curling. At last he turned to Nathan.

"Hadst thou intrusted thy treasure to him, never

wouldst thou have seen it again, nor would my master have known of the matter. Guard it and thyself as well."

Nathan stammered his thanks, wondering the while if he had not been delivered from one peril but to fall into another. He braced himself for the ordeal.

"The man hath spoken the truth," he confessed, bravely. "Five years hath made a change in my appearance, but look thou steadily upon my countenance and thou wilt see that I am the lad who escaped out of thine hand. Behold, it is revealed. What owe I thee?"

The soldier regarded him with the same frank admiration as had Naaman on the day previous. "Thy courage is equal to thy resourcefulness and independence of spirit. What a soldier thou wouldst make! Not at first did I know thee, but soon did thy brother's words bring thee to remembrance. Naught owest thou, for didst thou not guard and guide the maiden, Rachel, who was very dear to a friend of mine, a man to whom I owe my very life? Nor have I any claim upon thee after this lapse of time and we at peace with Israel and grateful because of the healing of my master by thy great prophet. Nay, fear not, but go in peace."

Nathan would have gone instantly and with joy had he known the way, and so it came about that once more was he indebted to the soldier against

whom he had cherished resentment for five long years. In the guest-chamber Eli had awaited his brother's return in profound melancholy. The servant came to conduct them to the apartments of Miriam's mistress just as Nathan and Isaac reached the threshold, but Eli sat still.

"Why go?" he asked, mournfully, in reply to Nathan's sharp remonstrance. "If we find, as seemeth likely, that the maid hath chosen to forget all she should remember: Israel the land of her birth, her mother and her home, and more important than all else, Jehovah her God, how could we carry the tidings which would be sharper than a sword to the heart of her mother?"

Isaac regarded the speaker with surprise. "Hadst thou dwelt long in Damascus," he said, "thou wouldst have heard that so far from forgetting Israel and Jehovah, the maid hath remembered with profit to the House of Naaman. The wonder of it is on every tongue."

He recounted his master's cure at the hands of the prophet, ascribing the suggestion to Miriam and praising her persistency. "In gratitude for this healing," he went on, "Naaman and his whole house have since worshiped only Jehovah, the God of Israel, at which the maid greatly rejoiceth."

Eli's face glowed. "Sayest thou so? Upon coming to Damascus we first sought Ezekiel to obtain news of Rachel and to see if she knew of Miriam.

Finding him long since dead and Rachel married and somewhere out on the hills with Benjamin, her husband, who is a shepherd, we then sought thee, fearing to mention Miriam's name or to betray our errand lest obstacles be put in our way or our treasure stolen. From Amos, seller of perfumes, did we learn that one, Isaac, wast in the service of Naaman at this house. From thee we hoped to learn of the maiden's whereabouts. Later we heard that an Israelitish maid, Miriam by name, was also here, so we sought to speak to the master."

He paused, gazing at Isaac with a strange mixture of diffidence and resolution. "We came," he went on, "thinking of thee as an enemy to be approached with cautious dread. We find thee a friend to whom we are much indebted."

Nathan nodded, telling briefly his experience just past and joining his thanks to Eli's, but Isaac waved aside the praise and, dismissing the servant, himself conducted them to the apartments where they were expected. Miriam was nowhere in sight. Adah listened languidly while Eli earnestly pleaded his cause, Nathan, as usual, in admiring silence. Isaac paced the courtyard without.

"And so because her master, thy husband, refuseth to accept a ransom," Eli supplicated, "even though we have offered to become servants in her stead, I have determined to ask of thee a gift—the gift of the maid to her mother, who yearneth for her."

Restless under those burning eyes, jealous for the reputation of her own household, she addressed him haughtily: "The same request hath already been preferred by Isaac, and although the maid is dear unto us, yet to-day hath she been told that she is not bound to the House of Naaman save by the cords of affection. When the rainy season is over, she is to go with her brother and his family, together with his flocks and herds, back to the Land of Israel, in the care of a captain and horsemen. Behold, before thou camest thou hadst thy desire."

Cutting short Eli's bewildered expressions of gratitude, she dispatched a servant in search of Miriam. To the waiting ones, it seemed hours before she came, although in reality it was but a few minutes. It was her fifteenth birthday and she was glowing with happiness, smiling radiantly upon the little world inside the walls of Naaman's house.

Adah claimed her attention: "Another gift, little maid, an unexpected one: tidings from thy home in Israel brought by these two young men. Dost thou know them?"

Miriam turned, scanning their faces eagerly. Nathan smiled and Eli began to speak, but she interrupted with a joyous cry: "Eli! Nathan! How tall thou art grown! And how didst thou ever find me? But how glad I am, how very glad! Tell me, my mother and my father—"

It was the same Miriam Eli had last seen in Is-

rael. Out in the courtyard Isaac heard the joyful greeting and through the partly opened door his eyes encountered Adah's, looking past the young people. She beckoned him to her side for a whispered word.

"I fear the little maid will no longer be *our* little maid."

The words were spoken in so low a tone he scarcely caught them, but they might have been shouted and Miriam and her visitors would not have heard. Isaac watched for a moment the little group so absorbed each in the other and sighed.

"Yea," he admitted, sadly, "we have lost our little maid and thou and I will sorrow most."

CHAPTER XXIII

ISRAEL

ONCE more it was spring. Once more were the rains over and the air balmy and the water courses quiet so that sheep might pass them and not be afraid. Once more were faint paths made across the sands of the wilderness and the stony hillsides by caravans large and small, abroad on errands of business or pleasure, and once more did the House of Naaman pass a restless night, for on the morrow Miriam was to depart for her beloved Land of Israel.

Roused from happy dreams, she could not understand for a moment the medley of confused but pleasurable sensations which surged over her; then she remembered clearly. Eli had come long months ago to take her back to things as they used to be, back to her mother and father—nay, with a rush of tears, not her father. Never again would she see that fond expression in his eyes, never again hear his kind voice, never again look upon his dear face. And her mother, old and broken, she was told. She could not realize it. Yet soon would she clasp that mother in her arms; soon see her and know for herself. To-morrow Isaac's band would give the captives in Syria safe conduct, Rachel and the babe

riding in the chariot beside her, and Benjamin leading his sheep before them. And all through this time of waiting Eli had been here: Eli, who had suffered with and for her, who had toiled and sacrificed and then found it had been in vain. Oh, Eli was so wonderful!

In another part of the House of Naaman he of whom she thought was also awake, a little smile on his lips, a little thrill in his heart. To have found her unchanged and unspoiled in the midst of all this heathen luxury! To have found her beautiful and true and sweet! To have thought that he toiled for the sake of the mothers, not knowing it was for Miriam, not understanding that there was just one maiden—only one!

But nights have a way of ending, and dawn came as radiant as Miriam's countenance when the household thronged around the altar which had been erected in one of the more private courtyards immediately after Naaman's return from Israel. In appearance it was merely a raised mound made of ordinary Syrian soil upon which had been spread the "two mules' burden of earth" he had begged from the Man of God. Thus hallowed by the sacred earth from the locality in which Jehovah was supposed to especially delight, it was considered a fitting place for the burnt-offering which Naaman himself piously sacrificed each morning.

This accomplished, the worshipers kneeling in

petitions more or less heartfelt, they rose and the service closed with a psalm of David, painstakingly taught by Miriam to the household singers. To-day the hymn concerned itself with the wonders of nature, not in and for themselves as did the psalms of the sun-worshippers, but extolling Jehovah as Lord over nature.

Miriam's voice led :

"The heavens declare the glory of God,
And the firmament showeth his handiwork."

The chorus responded :

"Day unto day uttereth speech,
And night unto night revealeth knowledge;
There is no speech, there are no words,
Neither is their voice heard.
Yet is their line gone out through all the earth,
And their words to the end of the world."

Miriam's voice again :

"In them hath Jehovah set a tent for the sun,"

And the chorus once more :

"Which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber,
And rejoiceth as a strong man to run his course.
His going forth is from the end of the heaven,
And his circuit unto the ends of it;
And there is nothing hid from the heat thereof."

At the close of the service Eli had speech with Miriam for a moment. "They go now," she told

him, "to the House of Rimmon, where the old King Ben-hadad leaneth for support upon the hand of his well-beloved servant, Naaman, my master. Isaac attendeth upon him. Thou wilt wish to go to see for thyself this sun-worship while I wait upon my mistress ere we depart."

"Always thou hast refused to go," Isaac reminded, seconding the invitation, and Eli, after a little hesitancy, consented.

Lemuel, with a smile meant to be friendly, joined the group as Miriam hastened away. "Once more hath Rimmon, our sun-god, vanquished the darkness and started his victorious journey across the face of the sky, but whether it be Rimmon, god of Syria, or Baal, god of Phoenicia, or Jehovah, God of Israel, let each worship according to the custom of the land, say I." He lowered his voice. "But didst thou think that Naaman would risk the favor of the king by importing a different God for worship at his private altar?"

Isaac sprang to his master's defense. "It proveth the generous kindness of the king, and is but what might be expected in gratitude for healing at the hands of Jehovah's prophet. Did not Naaman speak to Elisha, who refused to condemn his faithfulness to his old master, the king?"

Half an hour later they were all in the large and splendid Temple of Rimmon, the pride of Damascus architecture and decorating. It was beautiful with

flowers, the air heavy with incense. Eli noted the service, burdened with ceremony, the reverence during the sacrifice of the burnt-offering, the earnestness of the murmured prayers, the spreading out of the hands in formal attitudes of supplication, the general singing of hymns of praise. Even the lewd dancing of the sun virgins filled him with pity rather than horror.

He spoke his mind to Miriam as he rode beside the chariot that afternoon on the way to Israel. "To be so sincere yet so mistaken; to go from the altar of Jehovah to the Temple of Rimmon; to turn from the true God to the false; to have none to show them a better way! Nay, thou couldst not be reconciled to dwell in this heathen land."

For some reason Miriam resented his half-pitying, half-complacent tone. The quiet which had possessed her since the tearful farewells at Naaman's gate suddenly forsook her. "The daybreak, Eli, how cometh it, suddenly and with the noise of a trumpet or silently and by degrees, one faint radiance succeeding another until all is light?"

It was a moment before he caught her meaning. "Yea, I see," he said, glowing with admiration, "and *thou* hast led this household to its first, faint gleam—the gleam which shineth more and more unto the perfect daybreak."

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In the most splendid house of the "city" of Han-

nathon, the house with the courtyard which Judith had so coveted, Abner addressed her, a little frown on his forehead:

"One field after another have I added to what I already had. Anxious enough were our neighbors to sell and remove hence when the Syrian raid left them hungry and desolate and afraid. For almost nothing did many part with their possessions. And now the best vineyard of them all, that held by Sarah, widow of Caleb, I cannot buy because thou dost withhold the pearl which I might offer as surety for payment in full when the grapes be gathered in the fall. So obstinate is a woman! Long hath Sarah held the land and offer after offer hath she refused, saying the vineyard be all of her living save a few olive trees. Now, with Eli gone, a price hath been agreed upon, but she demanded of me a pledge. Come, give me the pearl."

Judith's eyes besought him piteously. "I cannot," she faltered.

He smiled unpleasantly, quite misunderstanding the reason for her hesitancy. "Because it is Sarah, who hath shared her home with thee? Because she is old before her time and sick? Because thou thinkest I offer her too little? Five years ago thou wert ready to leave her roof for mine. Hath she treated thee better than I?"

Again Judith's eyes spoke, this time with a flash of indignation. "Never hath she treated me well.

Grudgingly always did she offer me a home. Daughter that I have been to her for the past five years since Miriam was taken away, never doth she look at me but always *through* me. My services are acceptable but not myself. Never doth she let me forget that I am of strange people. It was Caleb, husband of Sarah and brother to my father, who was ever my friend." Her voice broke, but in a moment she went on more steadily: "What I do for her is in memory of him and of the little maid who loved me."

"I see," he declared, his eyebrows drawn together until they made one line: "So it is because I refused help to that visionary, Eli, who desired a gift toward the maid's ransom, that thou dost revenge thyself upon me by withholding the pearl. As if he would find trace of her! As if he would want to find what he would find! Thinkest thou a little maid would be safe in the midst of a rough soldiery? Thinkest thou the cruel Syrians would deal gently with a child? Nay, but when Eli returneth with a tale too pitiful to tell a sorrowing mother—"

Judith interrupted, her words coming chokingly: "When Eli failed to secure thy help, I besought thine aid for Miriam, adding my tears to his, thinking thou wouldst understand and sympathize, thou, a sorrowing father, who had himself lost a little maid, a maid so tiny and so sweet, stolen by Death, not by the Syrians—"

She turned her head and a sob escaped her. There was absolute silence in the apartment. Abner cleared his throat.

"Thou dost evade the question. Come, acknowledge the truth. Thou dost revenge thyself upon me by withholding the pearl."

"Nay," returned Judith, "I would scorn to avenge myself upon thee. "I—I—have lost the pearl."

He looked at her in amazement.

"And I feared to tell thee lest thou be angry," she added, not looking at him.

He strode across the room and took her face between his hands, striving to read her expression. Something he saw there dictated his next words:

"Unless it had been stolen from thee, small chance hast thou had to lose it. Nay, but thou dost deceive me. Speak without fear. What hast thou done with the jewel?"

She hesitated. "I lost it," she reiterated.

Storm clouds gathered on his face and the tempest broke in fury upon her: "Thinkest thou to deal doubly with me and yet find confidence and affection? Nay, but truth will I have from thee, else this home is no longer thine. Speak! What hast thou done with the pearl?"

Judith meditated. To confess while he was in that mood was to find neither understanding nor approval. She would wait until his heart was more tender toward her.

"I have lost it," she repeated, sullenly, and cowered as he came toward her.

Laying a rough hand on her shoulder he pointed to the door: "Go thou and enter not again until truth be thy companion."

Shaking off his hand she faced him. Not a word did she utter, but the look he never forgot. In a moment she had passed out of the door into the sun-kissed air, divorced by the one word which an Oriental husband may speak at any time to the wife of whom he has tired, and which even a Jew occasionally spoke in defiance of Mosaic law.

At the top of the hill which crowned the Valley of Jiptha-el, a woman bent and worn sat patiently on the coarse green grass under the shade of a wild fig tree. As Judith appeared she addressed her without salutation and without taking her eyes from the path.

"Day after day, from sunrise to sunset, have I stayed here, waiting for Eli to bring them back to me. Yet if they were coming, would they not have been here a month ago? Early were the rains over and long hath travelers been passing the mouth of the valley, but they for whom I wait come not."

Her voice had in it that note of calm endurance which belongs to those who have suffered. Judith, observing her in the strong sunlight, thought she had never looked so frail.

"To-day and to-morrow and the day after will I wait," went on Sarah, "and then—" she put her hand over her heart—"then if they come not, I will know he hath not found them and I think I cannot wait longer."

Judith was startled out of her own sad musings. "It is the first time I have heard thee hint at surrender," she said, reproachfully. "Nay, but be of good courage. What if they should come later?"

"If they come after I am gone," was the answer, the worn hand still over the tired heart, "tell them I waited as long as I could, as long as the pain would let me. Tell Eli that I say his faithfulness hath never let me feel the lack of a son, and tell Miriam that no one could take her place, but that thou, like a dear, elder daughter, hath filled a corner in my heart all thine own."

Judith stared incredulously. "Thou canst not mean—" she began, but Sarah went on, unheeding the interruption:

"Strange that the maiden I could not welcome should have been my stay and comfort these five years and more! And tell Benjamin, my beloved—"

Judith brushed away the tears: "Oh but thou dost not know the wrong—"

Sarah was shading her eyes with her hand: "What meaneth that cloud of dust in the valley?"

"Sheep," declared Judith with a careless glance. "Why, if I had ever known that thou hast even

thought of me kindly—and thou couldst not if thou knewest—”

“A flock of sheep larger, yea, twice as large as Benjamin tended,” commented Sarah. “See, the shepherd turneth them aside into the old sheepfold which hath not seen the like since the Syrians swooped down upon us so long ago. And a band of horsemen and a chariot! Thinkest thou the king’s messengers come this way? But why the flock escorted by soldiers?”

She turned a wondering face toward Judith, but her question was answered when a tall youth and a maiden, the first of the party to reach the top of the hill, paused to take breath after the steep climb. With true Eastern hospitality Sarah rose and tottered feebly toward them. A moment more and Eli’s voice sounded in her ears and Miriam’s arms were around her. Another moment and Benjamin was bending over her. She looked in bewildered fashion from one to the other as if scarce comprehending. At last she smiled upon them.

“Judith,” she called, “Judith, come thou. My children must be all together,” and closed her eyes with a little sigh of contentment.

“Then Rachel must be here also,” said Benjamin, drawing her toward him as she held the babe.

“And Nathan too,” put in Eli, taking his brother by the arm.

Among them all they carried Sarah to her old

home and, without one backward glance, the happy, chattering group entered, leaving a lone figure upon the hilltop.

It was a strange sight to be seen in Israel, that soldier in splendid Syrian dress, lingering there. He noted the village straggling up the unpaved street, the tender green of growing things in the valley beneath, the low cloud of dust hovering over the sheepfold. Memory was likewise busy. He recalled Miriam's joy in Eli's coming to Damascus, her unwonted gayety since they had started for the Land of Israel, her present absorption in her mother. Yet could aught else be expected? Reasoning with himself, excusing her, striving to stifle the pain of her thoughtlessness, he descended the hill to the encampment of the soldiers.

"Yea," he said mournfully to himself, "we have lost our little maid," and then, again, with heart-sick despair, "*I have lost my little maid.*"

CHAPTER XXIV

WAITING

IN the House of Abner the usual household scenes mocked the sorrowing man who beheld them. "Empty, empty, empty!" he moaned. "My Rose of Sharon have I plucked from its stem and cast aside. Ah, woe is my portion!"

Striding down the village street long before the morning mists had faded, he paused in front of Sarah's house, thereby startling a beautiful girl in foreign raiment who had just stepped over the threshold and surprising himself scarcely less. Then he recalled the conversation of his excited servants the day before, tidings which had been unheeded in his own grief. This must be Miriam!

"Nay," she replied to his question, "my mother and I are quite alone. Very early this morning did Benjamin take Rachel and their little son to the house of her parents, whom she saw but briefly yesterday. Eli and Nathan soon afterward took the path down the hill to the camp of the soldiers, and Judith departed likewise. Nay, I know not where."

He was hastening away when she ran and prostrated herself in his path. "My lord hath been good to his servant. I thank thee for the pearl which

thou didst send to Syria by the hand of Eli for my ransom."

Abner listened dully. "A pearl, thou sayest?" And then the significance of her speech dawned upon him. "Rise thou," he commanded, suavely, "it was but a small gift. Happy am I that it hath helped to purchase thy freedom."

A tenderly reminiscent smile played around Miriam's mouth. "Nay," she said, "I have returned to Israel because of a jewel more precious than any found in earth or sea: the love of my master and mistress. Naught would they accept but gave me freedom and sent me to my mother with a gift in mine hand."

"But the pearl," inquired Abner, eagerly. "What hath become of the jewel?"

"Eli hath already given it back to Judith, from whom he received it," she answered, and with cool adieux turned and left him.

He passed a hand over his brow, made as if to turn back, hesitated and then went on, groping his way down the hill and through the fields, wet with the night dews. The camp of the soldiers, so busy a scene at sunset, was now deserted, and huddled over the still warm ashes of what had recently been a fire was the figure he sought.

"I—arrived—too—late. They—were—already—gone," she said, slowly, in response to his excited inquiry.

Abner laid a shaking hand upon her shoulder. A crimson flush crept into the pale cheek. Rising suddenly she wrenched herself from his grasp and thrust something into his hand. "Take it," she cried. "I should have known thou wouldst have followed me even to Damascus to get it back. Lo, thou hast that which thou seekest," and turning, she fled.

He glanced hastily at the object she had given him. It was the pearl. With sudden passion he threw it into the unsearchable depths of the canyon and swiftly followed Judith, but a loose stone ended the pursuit. With a cry of pain she stumbled and fell, and when he bent over the prostrate figure a moment later her eyes were closed. It was Eli who answered Abner's hail and helped him carry his burden up the hill. Stopping for a moment's rest they met Miriam on her way to the spring.

With anxious questions and practical sympathy the girl knelt beside her cousin, slipping off the sandal and examining the rapidly swelling ankle. "Straight to my mother's house," she suggested. "It is so near," but Abner objected.

"To her own home," he commanded, sharply, preparing to resume his load.

Judith's eyes flew open. "Nay," she protested feebly. "Thou shouldst know that truth is not my companion nor hath ever been. I stole the pearl. It is that for which Caleb, brother to my father, was slain, and which Sarah, who hath been a mother to

me, cast away in her despair. I found it and used it to serve my own ends. Then, when it had long been a coal of fire in my bosom I gave it to Eli to help with the little maid's ransom. Yet sin reapeth sorrow as surely as harvest followeth the time of sowing. Because of the pearl my husband hath divorced me, and lest my disgrace be known to those to whom it would bring grief, I determined to use the jewel to purchase my way to Damascus with the soldiers."

Miriam's amazed look encountered Eli's stern one. "I knew not," he began, but Miriam was stroking Judith's forehead and speaking tenderly. "Always hast thou been unhappy in Hannathon, for wast not thy sadness mine? Yea, but come thou. Behold, our home is thine also."

"Nay," said Abner with decision, "we take thee to thine own house, thine and mine. As for the pearl, I knew not it belonged to Sarah. I hated it for the trouble it hath caused thee and me and just now I flung it into the gorge."

Eli gasped. "But thou wilt pay," he insisted. "Its value shalt thou redeem, that the widow and the orphan be not robbed."

Miriam was quite as decided. "Nay, it hath ever been an evil thing, and with the gift sent by Naaman my master, my mother will not miss the pearl. Rather would she wish it counted dead now that it hath been buried. Her anxiety will be for Judith. Take her to our house, I pray thee."

But he would not and the little procession resumed its slow march to his abode.

An hour later Miriam remembered the abandoned water jar, and bidding her cousin an affectionate farewell, hastened to reclaim her forgotten property. The sun had finally conquered the fog and sweet-scented breezes played with her hair, but the sight of Eli, dolorously gazing into the distance, hushed the song in her heart.

He broke the news without preamble. "Nathan hath returned to Damascus with the soldiers."

The water jar came near crashing to the earth in Miriam's consternation.

"Oft have we talked of our future plans now that thou art provided for," went on Eli, sure of understanding, "but only this morning, when we visited the camp, did he tell me of his resolve. Then I could not say him nay, knowing that here he must work for Abner, whom we like not, and I was the more persuaded when Isaac, chief of the band which brought us on our way, promised to be surety for the lad."

Miriam was staring wild-eyed into the valley at their feet. "Gone, thou sayest? The soldiers gone? And Isaac came not to my mother's house, came not to tell me that he goeth—"

Eli nodded impatiently. "Thinkest thou he would have said more to thee than to me? A likable young man and one in whom remorse hath kindled the

fires of penitence which alone purifieth. He hath restored thee to the home from which thou wert stolen, and he saith that when the rains are over and the roads passable once more he will return to see if thou dost wish to go back to Damascus. As if thou wouldst again be bound by the cords of bondage!"

But Miriam was half-way down the hill, sobbing bitterly, leaving Eli to gaze after her in great and growing bewilderment.

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The same sun which had kissed into bloom the wild flowers of Israel shone with dazzling brightness upon the white walls of Damascus, warming youth into gayety and age into contentment, but its rays were futile to coax into cheerfulness the great House of Naaman. There was an inexplicable sense of loss. The maid servants grumbled among themselves at the uncertainty of Milcah's temper and longed for Miriam, their ever-sympathetic mediator. The men servants hoped they would see her bright face again.

"Not that she ever had much to say," explained the old gatekeeper, "and few were the smiles she had for the young men, as most maids have, but the lowest servant and the grandest visitor were alike to her. Well do I remember—" and the garrulous tongue would run on as long as it had an audience.

Nor were the servants the only ones who missed Miriam. With light fingers Adah smoothed the

creases from between her brows. "The maid servants drive me frantic," she moaned. "'Do I want this?' and 'how will I have that?'" The little maid would have known without asking and seen that it was done without confusion. My heart yearneth over the maiden."

The soldier standing respectfully on the other side of the room nodded. "The young man Eli, to whom I talked long, saith that the mother faileth fast. Peradventure Miriam will be free to return to Syria if she so desire."

Adah's irritation increased. "The young man Eli! Admire him I must, but like him I cannot, for would he not rob thy master and me of the sunbeam which hath gladdened our hearts—the little maid we have come to love as a daughter? Nay, but not for always. One year, Isaac, shalt thou remain in Syria, then shalt thou return to Israel with a gift in thine hand, bringing Miriam and her mother gently and by slow degrees if the woman be feeble. Here shall the household delight to do her honor. One year, Isaac, from the time our little maid went away shall she come back to us!"

With this decree of its mistress, the House of Naaman entered, with what patience it could, upon its period of waiting.

But Miriam did *not* return at the end of a year. The wild flowers faded in Israel; the figs ripened

and were gone; the hills grew bare and yellow under the sun's persistent glare; the grapes turned dusky and filled with liquid sweetness; the olive trees blossomed and bore and were denuded; the rains came and went; barley and wheat were sowed and matured and were harvested and wild flowers bloomed a second time in Israel. It was another spring, the time Isaac had said he would come, but though Miriam strained her eyes day after day gazing afar, no foreign horsemen, no chariot, no Syrian camels bestirred the dust of the Valley of Jiptha-el.

Rachel touched her lightly on the shoulder as she stood in the doorway. There was yearning tenderness in the older woman's tones: "Still waitest thou, little maid? Peradventure they think thy mother hath need of thee, knowing not that she sleepeth long months in the sepulcher of thy people. Ample time hath there been since the rains ceased to take even the long journey from Damascus."

Miriam turned a musing countenance. "But when Isaac talked last with Eli he said he would return when the rains were over to see how it fareth with me and to bring me tidings of my home."

Rachel sighed and drew the girl close. "Is not thy mother's dwelling 'home'? And behold how Benjamin and little Caleb and I have loved thee. Are we not dearer than any in the House of Naaman?"

Miriam smiled and returned the caress. "The love

light in thine eyes is beautiful and it filleth me with delight when it shineth upon me, but mostly doth it shine for thy husband and babe and for joy in thy home, not for thy sister."

"It is the way with a woman," was the answer, "as some day thou wilt know for thyself, for I have seen a look in eyes that followed thee, such a look as a man giveth to but one maid, though peradventure thou knowest—"

She paused, but as there was no reply and Miriam's face was turned away, she hurried on: "And so thou wilt soon have a home of thine own if that is what thou desirest."

Miriam at last found voice: "'Home' is where thou art needed, Rachel, where thou hast a place no other can fill. Here in Israel, now that my mother hath left me—" there was a choking pause—"I am not necessary as I am to the household in Syria. Milcah groweth feeble in body and impatient in mind. The maid servants resent her sharpness, and my mistress is distressed when things go not well. But most of all do they need help to walk in the way of Jehovah, for him only do they serve since the healing of my master at his word. So do I wait until my mistress sendeth. Nay," as Rachel affectionately protested, "nay, I shall not be disappointed, for did not Isaac say he would come?"

And so she waited. Again the wild flowers faded and the figs ripened and the hills grew sere and

brown. It was midsummer. This time a pilgrim approached Hannathon, but he was alone and on foot, taking the steep hills and fertile vales with an easy, swinging stride as none but a Highlander, born and bred, could have taken them. From the flat roof where she was spreading linen to dry, Miriam saw him while yet a great way off and called to Rachel exultantly:

"Eli cometh."

She did not go to meet him. Instead, she hastily descended the stairs and retreated within the house, excitement in her manner and an unwonted color in her cheeks. When he entered, though they spoke only commonplaces, neither of them observed that Rachel took the child and slipped quietly out of the house with a smiling glance backward. Quite absorbed in each other, they sat on one of the low benches which lined three sides of the room.

"Two years hath it been, Miriam, since I joined myself to the young men, the Sons of the Prophet. Two full years have I hung upon the words of our great master, Elisha, learning much concerning our Law and its interpretation, and things of lesser importance such as music and sacred poetry. Thinkest thou not my mother would be pleased to know that I am of this company, even as was my father?"

The girl's face was glowing with enthusiasm. "It is as thou and I have dreamed from childhood, Eli."

"A little while shall I spend with thee and with

Benjamin, for I have a mind to learn the care of a flock. Then, with the treasure not needed for thy ransom will I purchase sheep and goats, which will supply my living while I preach the word of Jehovah to this froward people. Beyond that thou knowest—thou must know—my heart's desire."

He took her hand in his and although it trembled slightly it was not withdrawn.

"I think there will be no objection from thy brother, for long hath he known me, so I shall speak to him in due time without dread, but concerned am I to know if thou wouldst be satisfied so to spend thy life."

Her face paled under his anxious scrutiny. "Nay, I could not," she faltered.

He was silent a long moment, and when he spoke his voice betrayed profound sorrow. "It is even as I feared. In Damascus, where thy impressionable years were spent, thou hast learned the luxury which belongeth alone to kings' courts. Thou wouldst not be willing to toil as do the women of Israel, where there is neither man servant nor maid servant. Have I not been in Syria and do I not know how different are the ways there and here?"

She disengaged her hand and faced him earnestly: "Not because of its riches, Eli, must I return to the House of Naaman, but because of its poverty. Except through me they know not Jehovah."

"And except we of prophetic vision teach him in

Israel, the people are altogether turned unto idols," he answered, in his eyes the fanatical gleam of the zealot.

"Yea, but there be many Sons of the Prophet in Israel. There be none in Syria. Save as tidings of the healing of my master hath been scattered abroad and praise given to the God by whose hand it was performed, none knoweth Jehovah. He is merely the God of Israel, their sometimes-enemies in the south, and Rimmon and Baal and a host of others are more real to them. Come thou with me to Damascus, where thou art needed, and instead of a shepherd, thou shalt be a scribe, and being diligent in the business of Naaman, thou shalt also instruct the household and preach the word of the Lord to those who know it not otherwise. Say thou wilt come," she pleaded, but he only gazed at her pityingly.

"I pray thee, Miriam, deceive not thyself. For more than a year hast thou waited for a messenger from Syria and grown pale and thin with disappointment. Rachel hath told me, and have I not seen for myself when I came to visit thee? Nay, for if one were coming, there hath been time and to spare." His brow clouded. "Yet had I hoped to hear from Nathan through that same messenger. Both thou and I didst trust the soldier, and thou more than I."

The color sprang again to Miriam's cheek. "My trust will not be in vain," she declared, quietly.

"Something of ill hath happened in Damascus, else my mistress would have sent, but Isaac will yet come."

The conversation was interrupted by Rachel's entrance, and Miriam, making an excuse of the linen on the roof, ran quickly up the stairs to a task which consumed a vast amount of time even in the leisurely East, where time counted for little.

CHAPTER XXV

ANTICIPATION

ONCE again Isaac stood before Adah, mistress of the House of Naaman. He bowed low. "Everything is in readiness for our departure to Israel. The caravan waiteth without the gate and the maid servants thou art sending to attend upon Miriam are at hand, but lest thou shouldst have some last instructions for thy servant—"

Adah briefly acknowledged the courtesy and the courtier. She was thinner than of old, there was more of gray in her hair and the lines were deeper between her eyes. Now she rested her head upon her hand in the languor so becoming and so habitual.

"Only that thou shouldst bring the maid and her mother," she answered, "with any others she may not care to leave behind. If she will but come, for she is free to choose, as thou knowest! Thou takest a present in thine hand. Bring the maid safely, but in haste, for she is dear unto me."

The messenger bowed his understanding of his orders, but the lady was not through with the conference. She continued, musingly: "Two years since she left us, Isaac, and one since we had confidently planned for her return. It hath been a long,

long year, full of alarm and anxiety for us and of waiting for her. *If* she hath waited! Miriam is now at an age when maidens dream romantic, vagrant dreams of mating. Oft in the night seasons have I lain awake wondering if, in despair of a Syrian messenger, she hath betrothed herself or possibly married"—the speaker shuddered—"some Israelitish youth who would not be at home in Damascus or the House of Naaman. As thou knowest, Syrian ways are more gentle and their speech less rough than those of Israel." She paused, evidently expecting some comforting assurance that her fears were not, could not, be true.

"But the tones of love are as soft in one tongue as in another, and when interpreted to a maiden's willing heart they are softer still," he said, gently.

She was exasperated at his answer, not knowing what it had cost him.

"Miriam gave promise of beauty," she continued, "and Syrian lovers will she have in plenty, especially when it is known that the favor of the House of Naaman goeth with her. Already one, hoping to be the first, hath asked her of me in marriage."

The start which Isaac gave was not lost upon Adah, but she affected blindness.

"Thou knowest him well. It is thy friend, Lemuel."

The young soldier was visibly agitated. He prostrated himself before Adah, entreating her atten-

tion: "And if thy servant hath found favor in thy sight grant that this sacrifice shall not be. Always hath the maid feared and hated the man and with good cause, as we who know him can testify."

He hesitated before making a second request: "No man liveth who is good enough for her, but almost am I persuaded that she would rather be given into my care."

Adah repressed a smile. "I shall give Miriam to someone more to my liking and to hers than is Lemuel, but I had not supposed thou wouldst have taken advantage of the maid's childish expressions of fondness for thee to weave into them meanings she could not then understand."

Isaac's cheek flushed under his soldier tan. "I have not, my mistress, and I would not. A thousand times hath she innocently told me that which I long to hear her say with full knowledge of its import."

His manner changed to sadness. "Yet do I know that always she hath carried in her heart the image of Eli, and that she was greatly touched by his desire to ransom her from what he supposed was cruel slavery. He hath the soul of a saint and the mind of a seer, while thy servant is naught but a soldier. I fear that when I reach Hannathon it will be to find her choice hath already been made and needeth but thine approval."

Adah frowned. "Thy master's plans cannot be lightly changed. This is a childless home and its

treasure is great. We are not unmindful of the two through whose loving devotion much of its happiness hath come. Already hath thy master divided between thee and Miriam the present which the prophet of Israel refused, and seeing thy tender affection each for the other, we have determined that when the maid is old enough she shall be given thee in marriage. Thus shall the joy and contentment of both be assured, and thou shalt be unto us in our age and helplessness as the pillars are to the temple."

The maid servant who was fanning her mistress gasped audibly, for which indecorum the sorely displeased Adah sent her hastily and in disgrace from the room, but the punishment rested lightly. Once outside the angle of vision of those within, feet and tongue were nimble in disseminating this surprising bit of news. Only Milcah, exacting and irritable, did the excited servants fear to approach. The tidings spread, however, not only within the gate but without, and provided a choice bit of gossip for the caravan, impatiently awaiting its leader. Two of the company failed to receive the message with the laughing approval of the others: over the sensitive face of a boy passed a look of surprise, and the man next to him smiled an evil smile.

Meanwhile Isaac had stammered his thanks and had again become a suppliant: "But if it please not the maid, my mistress, I pray thee to entreat thy

husband that he transfer his favor to the young man Eli. I think there can be no other in Miriam's thoughts. Thou wilt find him worthy, and in the maiden's joy thou shalt have thy reward."

Adah was frankly amused. "Thou dost plead well to be released. Peradventure some other maiden—" but the look on his face checked the suggestion.

"Not for admiration of Eli do I speak, but for love of Miriam," he declared. "The circumstances in which I would have brought another maiden to the House of Naaman could not be justified in the pure eyes of my little maid."

"Then am I sure that thy master's confidence hath not been misplaced," she answered, softly, "and a maiden's unruly heart is not always wise. Nevertheless, do thou bring the young man if it seemeth right unto thee. I trust to thy discretion, and when I have had time to talk to Miriam and to observe for myself, I shall be better able to judge what is best. Only go thou quickly and delay not."

Left alone, Adah laughed quietly to herself. "If Miriam had the eyes of experience, she would prefer the good-looking young soldier who loveth her unselfishly to the gifted young fanatic who loveth an ideal more than any maid. I shall not compel her choice, but her master will like not the idea of sharing the treasure of the House of Naaman with a stranger."

Quite unexpectedly Milcah bent over her, having entered the apartment unobserved while her mistress mused. "Didst thou wish something? I thought I heard thee speak. That worthless maid I sent in here an hour ago hath not wit to do aught save curl her hair and make eyes at the men servants." The woman wiped away a tear and continued, speaking unsteadily: "The caravan hath just started. Many a time have I seen my brother ride to war and cared less, but to-day it seemeth so joyful it is almost solemn."

All at once the peace-loving Adah felt a vague uneasiness, dreading the unpleasantness of Milcah's disapproval. Clearly she had a duty of preparation.

"But if Isaac should ever think of marrying—" she began, but only to be promptly and tearfully interrupted:

"Say not so, for I should hate his wife. Never a maid have I seen save our little Miriam that I could regard with sisterly affection, and he would never think of the child *that way*."

Up the Valley of Jiptha-el in the heat of midsummer dashed a lone horseman. No anxious watcher from the roof heralded his approach, but every echo sought to imitate his wild shouts. The village was surprised, alarmed, but comforted when the horseman was discovered to be Nathan—reckless, jubilant, noisy, the veteran of one war and a braggart.

In a single breath he poured out greetings, exclamations, comments and all the gossip of Damascus.

Isaac was coming, but just this side of the Jordan he had been obliged to make camp with a sick soldier, Lemuel by name, so he (Nathan), unable to wait, had pushed on alone. Danger there was (his manner became very self-important), but what of that to one who had faced the hordes of the desert? Last year when the fruit trees first blossomed around Damascus, its peace and prosperity had been threatened by the half-wild tribes who roamed the desert to the east; beautiful, rich, lonely Damascus, whose stoutest walls were her walls of living men, her soldiery! But it had held, thanks to Naaman, Captain of the Host, who was respected and adored as no other man in the city.

It was the younger men who had showed most valor. Once he (Nathan) had been surrounded by five dark-skinned, savage enemies. Making ready his sling he was taking aim and would have slain them all had not Isaac and his servant interfered. He bore them no malice, but when Isaac realized that they had not been needed he had given him a horse all his own. Fine horse it was with dainty feet and fiery spirit, Isaac's share of the spoils of battle, but he would probably never miss it. Everybody knew he stood high in favor with the House of Naaman. He might in time be chief steward and rich.

This spring not a desert chieftain had dared even to gaze upon Damascus, but there were rumors that the Assyrian hosts came nearer and nearer. Not a soldier was allowed to leave the city. Day and night a watch had been maintained and every fighting man stood ready, but the Assyrians tarried. Pity, too! It would have been glorious to engage in battle with the finest army in the world. But no enemies having appeared by midsummer and scouting parties reporting the danger past for a time at least, Isaac had been allowed to take a small band into Israel to render the journey to Syria safe for Miriam. No doubt he would wish to hurry back, for was he not going to be married? The tidings had been scattered abroad the morning they had started. Nay, he knew nothing more.

All at once Nathan realized that his speech had been undiplomatic, and hastily turned his attention to Hannathon. Eli was taller and thinner than ever. He ought to be a soldier and properly fed. A good fighter he would make too. Miriam had become amazingly pretty. If she found there was no one to marry her, he would be willing. She looked something like Rachel did before she faded out so. How was Benjamin? He would ride out to find him after awhile, for would he not want to see the horse? And how the little boy had grown! Who would have supposed that such a sturdy, bright-looking youngster could have developed from that ugly, stupid

baby? The village was just the same; very unexciting after Damascus. The only new thing was the house. So the old was not good enough, and they had built one like those in Syria! Well, they were more comfortable. How sad that Sarah had not liked it! She might have lived longer if she had not been obliged to change her ways to suit those who had learned better.

But Eli must come and look at the horse he had left at the foot of the hill. He knew his master and he had a trick— Still talking, Nathan descended the path with Eli while Rachel and Miriam returned to their grinding at the mill, Rachel smiling and chatting, but Miriam strangely unresponsive. And once again a shadow darkened the doorway. With respectful salutations Lemuel stood upon the threshold, seeming not to be affected by the frigid greeting he received. He had merely pushed on ahead of the party, he said, desiring earnestly to see the maid whom he had missed sadly. Her mistress would explain why he felt he had a right to do this. (Miriam shrank from his bold gaze.)

Isaac came more slowly, seeming, in fact, to be in no haste to arrive. When he *did* come he would have news. Rumor said he was soon to be married, but since he refused to talk on the subject it was taken to mean that the matter had been arranged by his master's decree rather than his own preference. Not even the name of the maid was known, which

was further evidence that he was not proud of her. It was not unlikely that his choice centered elsewhere, but that might all be gossip. Certainly, it was beneath a man's honor to bear tales of his friend, and he and Isaac had long been comrades. Well, Isaac was handsome and in favor with the rich and powerful House of Naaman, so maids there were in plenty who would be glad to unite their fortunes with his.

The speaker may have felt the chill with which his tidings were received or his errand may have been finished. At all events he took his departure. Rachel watched him from the door, shivering the while.

"Let us sweep the house," she suggested. "I feel as if a serpent had uncoiled itself in our midst," but Miriam said nothing at all.

Screened from observation by the bushes down in the gorge, Lemuel examined a wounded foot. "Cursed be those thorns," he grumbled, "but it is worth it even though I had to leave my horse. Lucky that I remembered the cross-cuts of our scouting days in Israel! It hath helped me to repay Isaac for many long-cherished grudges."

He glanced at the sun and uttered an exclamation. "I had better be on my way to Damascus by the time he findeth that I have tricked him."

Near at hand an animal whinnied and Lemuel's eyes brightened. A few moments later, where the

path led into the valley road, a horse and its rider dodged quickly behind a clump of trees to avoid being seen by a caravan at the head of which rode Isaac, and that afternoon Nathan searched sorrowfully but in vain for his steed of the desert.

CHAPTER XXVI

CERTAINTY

A TRIFLE shyly Miriam stood in the doorway awaiting Isaac, who was coming alone up the hill. One look into his face as he came nearer, with eyes only for her, and both her hands were outstretched, but Eli pushed past her, speaking low :

"I pray thee, Miriam, let us greet the man with becoming dignity. Behold, have I not been as a son in thy mother's household and in Benjamin's absence is it not my place to welcome its guests?"

The girl laughed happily. "Why, it is only Isaac. He would think it strange if I delayed to meet him and I am so glad, so very glad, he hath come."

"But he may misunderstand thy eagerness, Miriam." Eli's tones were somewhat stern. "Remember, thou art no longer a child."

Miriam stopped short, reddening painfully. "Isaac hath never misunderstood," she retorted.

Nevertheless, when he took both her hands in his she was for the first time unable to meet his gaze frankly. He found it very charming and in some circumstances it might have been encouraging, but he had seen, if he had not heard, and now put his own construction upon the degree of understanding between herself and Eli. With a heavy heart he

noticed that Eli acted as host, a right not only undisputed but apparently expected by both Rachel and Miriam. From this he drew further disquieting conclusions, which were not contradicted by the conversation he was allowed with Miriam herself.

She asked innumerable questions about the household at Damascus, but there was not half time to answer fully. She told him a great deal about her mother's last days and very little about herself. Far too little to satisfy him. She called his attention to the new abode, built on the site of the old with the gift she had brought from the House of Naaman. Her mother had never found the dwelling comfortable. It had seemed too luxurious to have those low and wide benches on three sides of the room for sitting and sleeping, and she was uneasy about the animals, banished to quarters in the courtyard. She had felt more secure to have them at night on the unfloored portion of the same apartment. But the new house was much prized by Benjamin and Rachel, and since they preferred to remain in Israel to be the stay and consolation of Rachel's parents, Miriam was glad they would have the comfort of a home like those in Syria.

The gift Isaac had just brought—such a generous present from her beloved master and mistress—should be used to purchase a larger flock for Benjamin and thus secure a greater income. Then she spoke of her plans for Eli (she and Isaac were alone

for a few minutes), plans which he heartily approved because it would please her. She talked with a pretty hesitancy and with such an evident gratitude and admiration for Eli that Isaac's worst fears were confirmed, yet he could not bring himself to ask a question direct. He would wait a few days and observe for himself, and he was comforted to an extent by the fact that she desired to return to Damascus. He had hardly expected such willingness.

Finally, Isaac and Eli and Rachel and Miriam together decided that the journey to Syria should not be undertaken for a week. Isaac particularly wished to see Benjamin, and a week would give Miriam time to say her farewells without haste. Also the soldiers would be grateful for a rest in the shade of the mountains. The midsummer heat of the roads they must travel was anything but pleasant, but circumstances had granted them no choice. As Miriam watched him depart, the virus of Lemuel's remarks began to be active in her brain. Isaac was evidently not in any hurry to return to Damascus!

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It was the morning of Miriam's departure and she and Rachel, from the doorway, were watching the sun rise.

"Thou art so pale, Miriam. Thou dost not have to go. Hast not thy generous master freed thee? I shall miss thee every day."

"And every day will I think of thee, Rachel, and of Benjamin and little Caleb, and wish we could all be in the same country rather than separated."

"But I am better satisfied to know that Isaac is going to be married," went on the older woman. "His wife will be like a sister, taking my place to thee."

There was no answer.

"Why—why—Miriam," with a bewildered little laugh, "wouldst thou have me think—why, art thou not glad, too?"

"Nay," answered the girl, "I like not to dwell upon the thought. Have I not always been first to him, next after his duty to his master? And now how greatly is he changed! A week hath passed and he hath never mentioned the maiden's name nor even told me he is to be married. If it be thus now—"

Rachel was aghast. Her tones were pityingly severe: "Thou hast no mother, Miriam, and I must speak plainly for thine own good. Isaac took thee into captivity out of no malice. Thou wert one of the spoils of war. Afterward, when he knew thou wert sister to Benjamin, the man who had befriended him, he was sorry and tried to be kind, but remorse is not love. Thou must not expect it of him."

The girl turned a face as pink as the sky. "I go to the sepulcher," she said, and slipped hastily out of the door—to confront Eli.

It was a pale and scandalized Eli, but he spoke quietly: "I will go with thee, for doth not my mother lie there also?"

Halfway down the hill they met Isaac and Benjamin in earnest conversation. Isaac intercepted the pair: "The caravan is ready. The start awaiteth thy pleasure."

"In an hour," Eli returned, briefly, but Miriam answered not at all, nor even raised her eyes.

As they plodded on, Isaac turned sadly to Benjamin: "I fear my question is already answered."

Benjamin put a sympathetic hand upon his shoulder. "Then for many reasons would I be sorry," he declared, "yet peradventure the maiden's mistress will not let her make such a mistake."

Not until they neared their destination did Eli speak to Miriam, then he burst forth with a vehemence which awed her: "Could *he* come with thee to this sacred place? Canst thou share thy holiest memories with him? Nay, for well thou knowest that our two mothers lie here because of the wounds he inflicted."

"Say rather 'the wounds of war,' Eli. Isaac hath repented of his part and hath made such restitution as he could. Should we count it as naught? I think our mothers would forgive, and doth not our Law require it?"

Eli continued as if he had not heard: "Tidings did I hear in the camp that thy mistress was to give

thee to him in marriage, but because thou hast filled my heart did I believe I was in thine. I did not know thou wouldst prefer the servant of the rich man, who hath manners which belong to a king's court, who is clothed in fine linen and fareth sumptuously every day. I thought not thou wouldst despise the preacher of Jehovah, whose lot will be a far country and coarse apparel and scanty food and the contempt and ridicule of the multitude. Thou didst tell me that it was duty which called thee to Damascus. I have just learned that it was the voice of thy beloved. Nor would I have believed had I not heard from thine own lips through the open door."

Miriam lifted her head a trifle defiantly. "What thou sayest is as if it were in an unknown tongue. The tidings thou hast heard have not reached mine ears, nor can it be true when well I know that it would not be to his liking." Her tones were bitter. "The poison of Lemuel's remarks was still at work."

She went on more calmly: "Never have I thought of Isaac as thou hast described him but only as the friend in whom I could safely trust, who was never amused like my mistress nor impatient like Milcah nor indifferent like everyone else."

"But friendship is not love, Miriam. Thou must not think it."

Suddenly he took her in his arms. "Thou art mine," he cried, fiercely. "Long ago thy mother

gave thee to me. Neither Isaac nor any man shall take thee from me."

He drew a long, sobbing breath, gazing at her with a face so full of tragic sorrow she was appalled.

"I owe thee so much—so much, Eli," she whispered, contritely.

"He shall not *take* thee," repeated the young man, "but I shall go with thee to Damascus to preach the word of Jehovah as we have said, and when the time cometh I will *give* thee to him if it pleaseth thee."

Releasing her not ungently he strode away. She stood still for a moment, then she called after him, her voice sweetly compassionate. She begged him to tarry, but he seemed not to hear, and after a little she followed him to the sleeping place of the dead.

It was not a cheerful party which started that day to Syria. Farewell tears were thinly veiled under encouraging smiles. Miriam was so obviously considerate for Eli that Isaac was plunged into the depths of despondency. Eli himself seemed lost in painful reverie. Nathan, obliged to ride the horse Lemuel had not had opportunity to take, loudly bewailed his own better steed, while the soldier-escort, under its breath, cursed the merciless rays of the sun.

Hour after hour they journeyed. Through dim eyes Miriam beheld a fleeting picture of the hilltop

villages and scattered groves of her beloved Israel. Here and there they passed other travelers and infrequent beggars. Once, the chariot in which Miriam and her two maid servants were riding came to a sudden halt. Apparently there was some obstruction in the road ahead. A leper, hurrying away, was yet near enough for her to look upon his repulsive countenance. Shuddering, she turned to see if Eli or Nathan had noticed, but they were busy helping the soldiers conceal a loathsome something with a light covering of earth. The leper was Gehazi!

Isaac rode up with an explanatory word. He pointed to the mound: "It is the deserter, Lemuel. Some wild beast hath met him at night while he slept and where there was none to help. The body is gnawed and broken, but there can be no mistake."

Nathan called excitedly and Isaac responded at once. A little later they returned with Nathan's own horse, which had broken his halter—doubtless through fright—and roamed at will until reclaimed by his master. For half an hour Miriam listened indulgently to the boy's enthusiastic recital of the capture and the steed's wonders, then Nathan took a place in the rear. They descended the hot gorge in which roared the Jordan, crossed its foaming waters, emerged into the freer air of the uplands and so to the main-traveled roads leading north. Nathan was again beside Miriam.

"I have been watching the party for hours," he declared with a boisterous laugh. "Funny how it rides. The soldiers plod along silently, sometimes jesting or quarreling. Obeying is their business. Never once hath Eli turned his head. Already he seeth himself a prophet of the Lord in the strange land toward which he goeth. But ever Isaac watcheth thee, and always thine eyes are turned toward Eli."

As they resumed their journey after the noon-time rest it was Isaac who rode beside the chariot. He put into her hands a piece of sheepskin, folded protectingly over something evidently very precious.

"Once," he explained, "when thou wert but a little maid and knewest not the meaning of such things, I bound these damson blossoms upon my heart in token of loving devotion to thee. They have withered, but that for which they stood has never died. I cannot suppose"—with an involuntary glance at Eli—"that thou wilt treasure them as I have, but it is thy right to know."

Without waiting for an answer he dropped back to his old position. A long time Miriam stared at the blossoms, then, with tenderest care she folded them in their sheepskin covering and put them in her bosom. He was at her side instantly.

"Thou dost not count them as naught, Miriam?"

"Love is not friendship, Isaac."

The thrill he had experienced suddenly died. It

was a moment before he could answer in the old, matter-of-fact way. "Then it were only selfishness, Miriam. If it be not friendship, then it is not love either, for love is friendship intensified, glorified."

She was silent. After some hesitancy he spoke again, this time with quiet determination and in the speech of Israel, which they had used before so that the maid servants might not understand.

"The hour hath come, Miriam, when I must tell thee what thy mistress hath said and ask thee for the truth." He told her briefly the plans Adah had outlined to him.

She made no comment.

"But because thou wert free in Israel and but a servant in Syria I have wondered if thou art sacrificing thyself to give advantages to Eli."

The answer was very faint. "Nay, Isaac."

"Thy sense of duty is strong, Miriam, and thou art necessary to the happiness of the household in Damascus, yet because thou hast cherished the token which hath meant so much to me I almost thought—peradventure because I so wished it might be—"

She did not speak for so long that he peered under the awning, beholding a face that crimsoned as it looked into his and in the eyes a something which lit his own with rapturous hope.

"I could not be content to be free when thou wert still in bondage, Isaac." The tones were very low, very sweet, very hesitant.

“Miriam,” he gasped, “thou canst not mean—thou dost not—”

But evidently she did, for the two maid servants exchanged smiles and meaning glances, and he continued to ride beside the chariot while they drew near to Damascus and the glad welcome of the House of Naaman.

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